STREET & SMITH'S

WILD WEST WEEKLY

AUGUST 13, 1938

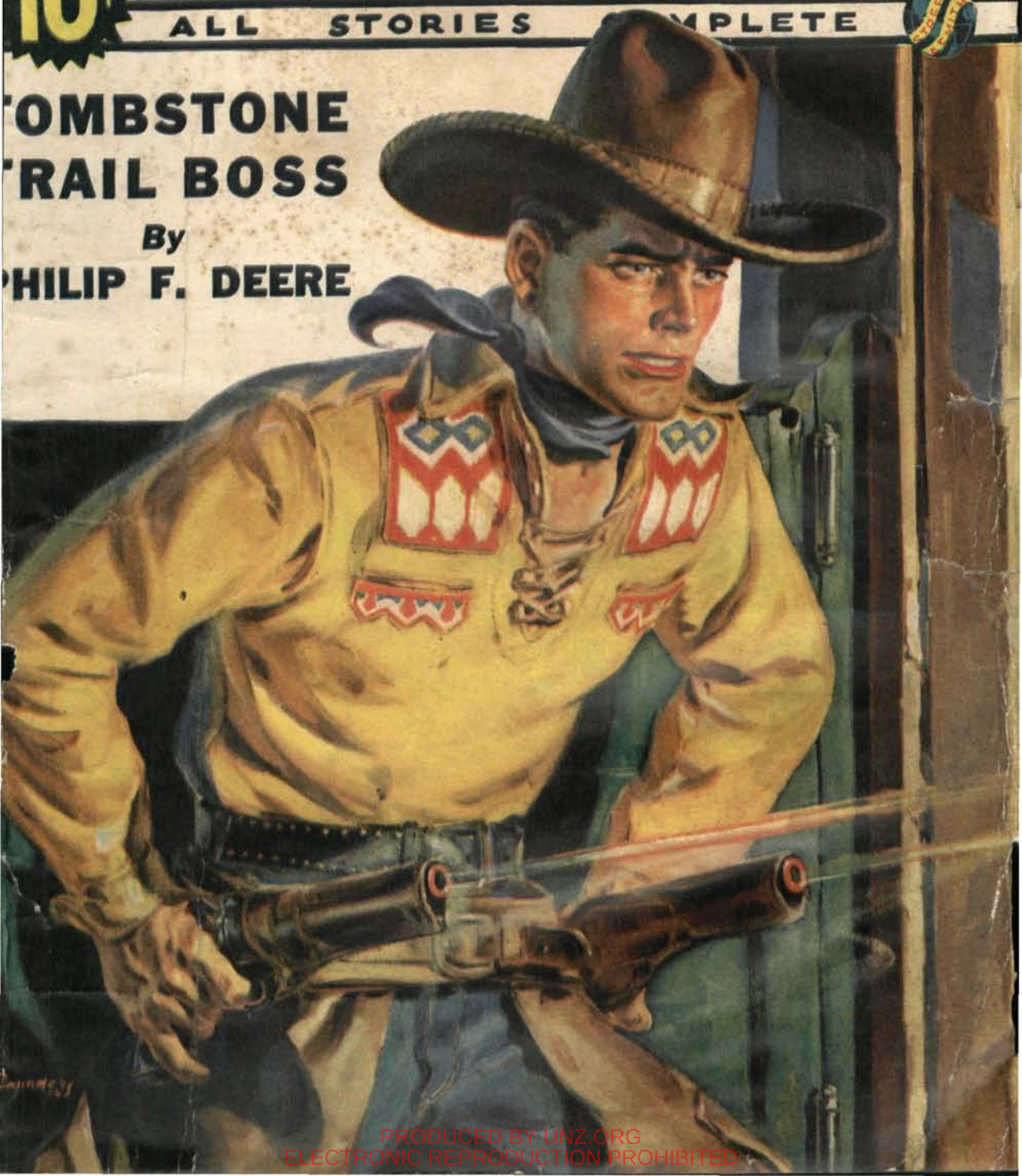
10¢

ALL STORIES COMPLETE

TOMBSTONE TRAIL BOSS

By

PHILIP F. DEERE



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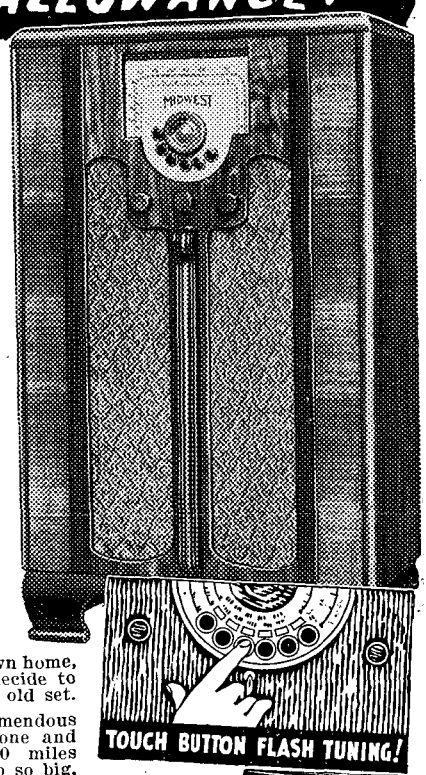

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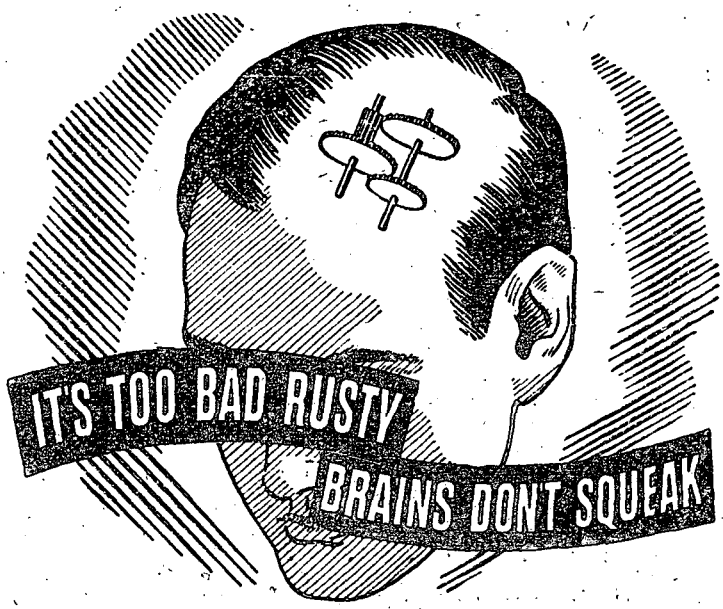

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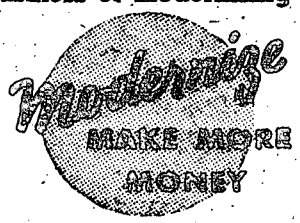

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WILD WEST WEEKLY
FOUNDED 1902

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Vol. 121, No. 5 CONTENTS FOR AUGUST 13, 1938 Whole No. 1869

Cover Picture—Scene from "Tombstone Trail Boss" . . . *Painted by Saunders*

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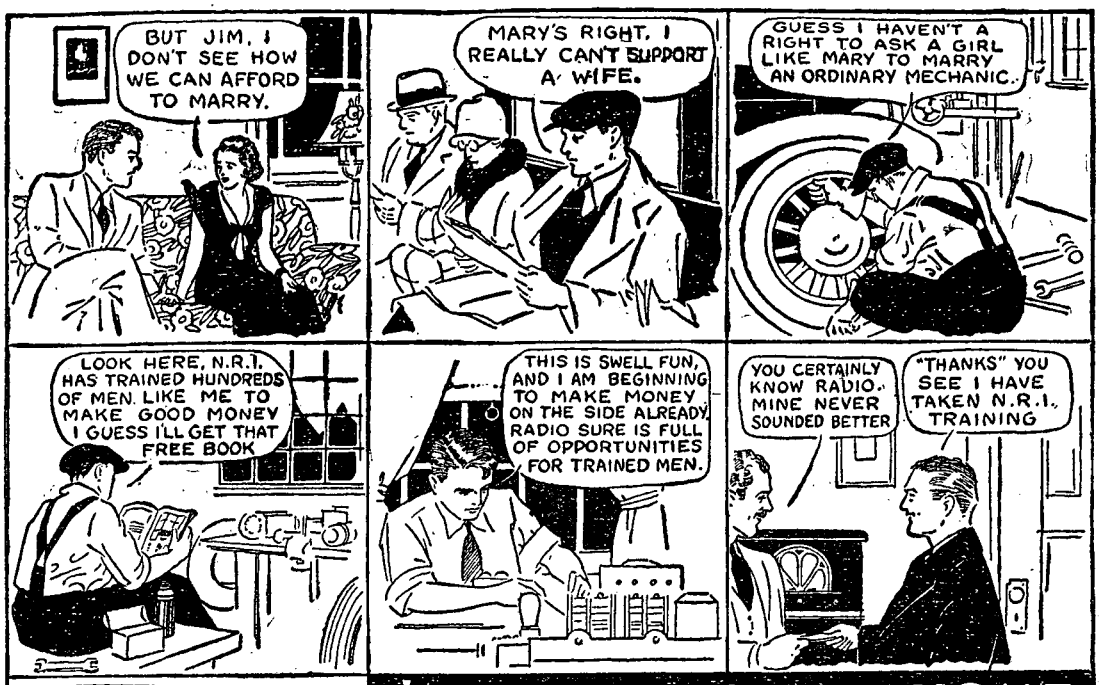
BUT JIM, I DON'T SEE HOW WE CAN AFFORD TO MARRY.
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Tombstone Trail Boss

By Philip F. Deere

Author of "Gun Guard's Game," etc.

CHAPTER I.

A COWHAND'S VOW.

LON COLE did not feel the sharp recoil of the flaming six-gun in his brown hand, nor wince as the thunder of the exploding cartridge numbed his eardrums. His senses held the numbness of despair as the bite of raw gunpowder fumed upward from the .45 bore to sting his nostrils.

"There warn't no call for this killin'," hammered the voice of his conscience, "no sense at all!"

Like a man in a stupor, the young puncher peered through the sifting veil of smoke, to where "Shag" Crockett was seeking to stem the crimson flow from his chest.

Fascinated, Lon Cole watched the shaggy-jawed hombre fight to keep his legs from wabbling, watched the ashen pallor of death mount in the face of the waddy who a moment before had bellowed a death challenge at him, a challenge preceded by the rasp of gun steel leaving leather.

Now Crockett's smoking Colts lay in the dusty street of the Wyoming cattle town. A second later the tendons in Crockett's legs seemed to collapse under the strain of supporting his beefy form, and the man was dead before his twisting frame dropped to hide the fallen six-guns from Cole's view.

Revulsion clogged Lon Cole's throat, made a feeling of nausea cur-

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When a waddy's got as good reasons fer leavin' town as Lon Cole has, he's goin' to make hisself plenty dangerous to any one who crosses 'im.

dle his stomach as he relaxed the tension of his gun hand and slowly chocked his Colt into his well-oiled holster at his thigh.

"Another dead man," whispered the waddy, rubbing the stain of gunpowder from his hand. "An' for what? I didn't have no quarrel with Shag Crocket. I'd 'a' heap ruther shooken his hand than beat his draw."

The stunned group that had watched the brief gun battle in front of the Latigo post office began to thaw out, as Lon Cole lurched his way toward the post-office porch. Men who had frozen at the first bellowing yell from Shag Crockett's throat now began to leave the saloon porch across the street and hasten toward the dead man.

A lanky man in flat-crowned Stetson on which was pinned a sheriff's badge emerged from a rock-walled building next the post office, and paused to stare at Cole with brittle eyes.

"I ain't arrestin' you fer this killin', Cole," rasped the lawman, "because I seen the hull thing an' I know it was self-defense. But you knowed Shag Crockett had sworn

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tuh shoot you if you laid a hoof inside o' Latigo, an' you didn't try tuh dodge havin' trouble with him."

Lon Cole was not looking at the sheriff. His eyes were focused on "War-horse" Raine, boss of the Triple 6 spread, whose range Cole had been riding for the past three years. Standing with Raine in the post-office doorway were his daughter Vola and Jed Surfman of the Diamond X outfit.

Under the sweeping brim of her cream-white Stetson, Vola Raine's face was as white as marble and, as her gaze met Cole's, she seemed to shudder and link her arm through Surfman's for support. That look of revulsion stabbed Cole deeper than had the sound of the gunfire which had sent his fatal slug boring into Shag Crockett's brisket.

Heading toward the trio with boots that dragged the plank floor of the post-office porch, Lon Cole mumbled helplessly:

"Thar wasn't nothin' else I could do. Yuh heard Shag say he was goin' tuh kill me because o' that ruckus I had with his brother."

Jed Surfman, the sleekly groomed range baron of Thundergust Valley and chief suitor for the hand of Vola Raine, exposed his teeth in a bitter sneer of disdain.

"You shot down Crockett's brother three weeks ago, Cole. Any man worthy of the name would try to get revenge, and that was why Shag Crockett warned you there would be gun play next time your trails crossed."

Cole's shoulders slumped. He saw no need to point out once more the circumstances under which he had been forced to shoot "Bull" Crockett, head bartender of the Thundergust Saloon, less than a month before.

Bull Crockett had been in the act of robbing a bank over in Whetstone when his bandanna mask had dropped to reveal his face. By chance, Lon Cole had been in that bank conducting some business for Raine, and had recognized the Latigo saloonman.

Bull Crockett had swung his guns to murder Lon Cole, and the fraction of a second's delay while he readjusted his mask had given the Triple 6 cowboy his chance for a hip shot that had drilled the bandit's skull and saved the bank from a wipe-out.

Thundergust Valley, to a man, had acclaimed the waddy's fast shooting—all except Crockett's drunken brother Shag, who had vowed to slay Cole at their first meeting.

"I—I'm sorry you had tuh—tuh see that, Vola," husked the waddy, his gaze recoiling from the horror which shone in the girl's eyes. "But Shag forced the play."

Jed Surfman turned impatiently to the girl's white-headed old father.

"Raine, I've been trying to tell you this Cole is a no-good killer. The way he threw his gun just now ought to prove to you he isn't what he claims to be—just a cowprod who's drifted up here from Texas. I say he's a 'Wanted' killer from down south, living up here under an assumed name."

War-horse Raine cut in before Cole's angry denial could pass his lips.

"He's always been a top cowhand, Jed, an' that's why I've kept him on the spread. An' he's ambitious tuh buy the Lazy Arrow outfit over on the Whetstone an' start cow ranchin' fer hisself. I jest wanted tuh give him a chance tuh make a stake."

Surfman began drawing on a pair of gauntlets, his lips compressed until they were oyster-colored.

"Very well, Raine. If you insist

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on keeping a murderer on your pay roll, just forget about the little loan you and I were arranging this morning. I wash my hands of your troubles."

Lon Cole glanced over his shoulder, to where a crowd of Stetson-hatted waddies were knotting about the corpse of Shag Crockett.

Drawing a deep breath, the waddy turned to Raine, and thoughts roiled in his head as he struggled to make a decision.

Well enough, Lon Cole knew that Vola Raine might have learned to care for him, to help him in his goal to own the little Lazy Arrow Ranch and start a brand of his own. But equally well, Lon Cole was aware of the strangle hold which Jed Surfman held upon the girl's father. He knew that the reason Raine was in Latigo this morning was to arrange a loan with Surfman to tide him over a year that had brought heavy losses due to blackleg and drought.

"I'm drawin' my pay, War-horse," said the Texan, pulling his shoulders erect with an effort. "I reckon I've caused you more trouble'n my ranch work has been worth tuh yuh. I reckon I'll head back tuh Texas an' see if I cain't make my stake down thar."

Triumph rose in Surfman's beady eyes as he turned and led Vola Raine back into the post office. The girl was still staring transfixed at the scene out on the street, where the sheriff was superintending the transfer of Shag Crockett's body to the morgue.

War-horse Raine cleared his throat, groped out a hand to grip Cole's rope-calloused palm.

"My hands is tied tighter'n a dogie's laigs, Cole," choked the old Triple 6 boss. "Fer some reason Surfman's bound tuh git yuh fired. Claims yo're a wild one, mebbe an owl-hooter from the border country."

Cole tightened the buckle of his chaps, straightened the crown of his brown Stetson.

"Yuh kin mail what wages is due me tuh General Delivery at Palo Verde, Texas, boss," replied the waddy. "I reckon mebbe I kin sign on with some trail outfit movin' north from the Panhandle. An' sometime, if yore daughter should ever give yuh the chance, yuh might tell her that I'm intendin' tuh make enough dinero tuh come back an' buy the Lazy Arrow outfit an'—an' make her my pardner, if she doesn't decide she wants that Surfman jasper."

Before Raine could rasp out a protest, the waddy turned and pushed his way through the crowd of excited punchers. Over at the Silver Bridle livery barn Cole saddled his strawberry roan. In a few minutes he was leaving Latigo by a back street, his face a mask of bitterness tempered with resolution.

He flung his ice-blue gaze about the mountain-girdled vista of Thundergust Valley, the fertile cow country of central Wyoming that had struck his eye and urged him to drop his roaming life and drive his picket pin for keeps.

His bullhide chaps bore the scuffs and scars of the cactus country, and he was heading back to the place from which he had come three years before. He was looking for an opportunity to become something more worth while than a waddy shackled to a thirty-a-month riding job the rest of his life.

Fate had stacked the cards against him, and in his moment of extremity Cole was turning back to the Texas prairies he knew best. But in his heart and spirit, Lon Cole knew, he

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was living here in Wyoming, in the keeping of the girl whose face had seemed to freeze when she watched him sling a .45 from leather and kill a man in the twinkling of an eye.

CHAPTER II.

SHORTHORN STAKES.

PALO VERDE was the southernmost town in the string of cow-country settlements on Tombstone Trail, that hoof-plowed route which Texas cattle took to reach the market at Longhorn City, Kansas.

Cowboys who had lost their lives in the countless trail drives of the past, filled the graves which lined the route to Longhorn City. There were victims of raiding outlaws after rustled stock; there were the sad prey of stampeding cattle roused out of bedground by nighttime thunderstorms; cowboys drowned in the perilous crossings of the frontier rivers—the Brazos, the Red, the Canadian, and the Cimarron—all occupied the graves strewn along the trail to Longhorn City.

Gravestones replaced milestones and were spaced even more frequently; such had been the inevitable reason why cattlemen had dubbed the route by the sinister name of "Tombstone Trail."

Out of the north country, following in reverse the grim miles of Tombstone Trail, rode Lon Cole of Wyoming, in time to hit Palo Verde when the first herds had begun to move up from Texas prairies.

"Hyar we are, Rojo hoss," muttered the waddy as he skirted bedded-down herds and brought the lights of Palo Verde into view one black night a month after his departure from Wyoming. "We swore we wouldn't come back until we could brag about our ranch up in the pine-tree country, but instead we're startin' all over ag'in."

Cole turned over his strawberry roan to a Mexican hostler at the O. K. Corral and headed along the familiar main street of the trail town, with its false-fronted saloons and stores, livery barns, and gambling dives walled with adobe and roofed with prairie bush.

Two lonesome dollars jingled in the pocket of the waddy's buckskin shirt as he trailed his spurs up the front steps of the Texicano Saloon & Restaurant.

But Cole knew that awaiting him in the post office would be Warhorse Raine's check covering his meager savings. That would easily tide him over for grub and stable rent if he failed to land a job on one of the trail herds northward bound up Tombstone Trail.

Shouldering his way through the slatted batwing doors, Lon Cole surveyed the usual rowdy crowd in the Texicano barroom. There were many familiar faces—buckaroos he had shared bunk houses with in various Texas spreads; ranchmen talking over beef markets, the condition of the grass up Oklahoma way, and sundry range gossip; bar flies still begging drinks from the drovers who lined the brass rail; cold-faced professional gamblers at the poker tables in the adjoining room.

Cole found a vacant stool at the lunch counter and ordered his supper. When his meal was finished, he built himself a cigarette, and then turned his attention to the gambling room.

Owners of trail herds, he knew, were apt to be patronizing the roulette wheel, the crap tables, and the dancing dice in the chuck-a-luck cages. They were the hombres who hired trail crews, and at every cow town they usually took on rannihans

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to replace those who blew in their wages for drinks and were in no condition to do saddle duty until another herd came along when they had sobered up.

"Waal, if it ain't Lon Cole!" came a cheery voice at the waddy's elbow. "I heard yuh'd settled up Wyomin' way. How come yo're down hyar at the bottom end o' Tombstone Trail, son?"

Cole turned, to peer into the grizzled face of a saloon bum whose name he did not remember.

"Howdy, amigo," he grunted. "Yep, I couldn't stay away from the ol' Lone Star State, I reckon. Say—yuh happen tuh know any herd owner yuh could p'int out tuh me tuh-night? I'm honin' tuh rent my loop tuh one o' these Tombstone Trail outfits."

The bar fly rubbed a whiskery jaw and surveyed the crowded gambling room. Then his gaze flickered significantly toward the bar, and Cole flipped a four-bit piece into the bum's flabby palm.

"Thar's ol' Flint Trone, owner o' the Circle Chain critters," pointed out the drunkard. "His steers got more tallow on their ribs than any o' the outfits that's been hazed through Palo Verde this season. An' I heard him say he's short-handed."

Lon Cole nodded interestedly, his gaze following the saloon bum's craggy finger and coming to rest on a bony-faced old cattleman seated at a corner poker table, cards hugged close against his spotted calf-hide vest. A goatlike tuft of beard was on Flint Trone's jaw, and his beady eyes were flushed with drink.

"Trone's trompin' on dangerous ground tuh-night," went on the bar fly. "Buckin' Shuffles Yorbuss's play—Yorbuss bein' the slickest card shark this side o' the Rio Grande. An' betwixt you an' me an' the snubbin' post, Lon, that tinhorn is after Trone's cattle herd. If he could git the bill o' sale tuh them mosshorns, Yorbuss could give up card sharpin' fer years tuh come."

The bar fly hurried off toward the counter to guzzle down cheap rotgut with the money Cole had given him in return for trail information.

Hooking thumbs to armpits, Lon Cole made his way through the crowd flanking the roulette table and came to a halt at "Shuffles" Yorbuss's poker table.

Apparently a tense point had come in the evening's play, for Flint Trone was shaking like an agave bush in a hurricane, and his breath was coming in short gasps as he gurgled raw whisky from the bottle beside his chair.

"Think it over, Trone," came the oily, persuasive tones of the gambler. "Thar's ten thousand bucks in this pot, countin' the dinero I got in the house bank. I'm stakin' the hull works agin' a bill o' sale tuh yore Circle Chain herd."

Lon Cole felt his hackles rise as he surveyed the gambler. Yorbuss had flowing black hair brushed back over his ears and meeting the collar of his black, long-tailed coat. Bulges in Yorbuss's sleeves indicated derringers hidden there, the favorite trick of cagy gamblers who lived by their wits, their crooked skill, and the speed of their draws.

The gambler's face reminded Cole of a poorly embalmed corpse, so lacking in color was it. Yorbuss chewed the end of a crooked black cheroot as he kept his flint-black eyes leveled on the drunken rancher at his elbow.

"'*Shta bueno*, Yorbush!" croaked Trone thickly. "Reckon nobody thish shide o' blazes could beat my

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hand. Hyar's my bill o' shale tuh the Circle Chain critters, down tuh the lash hoff an' horn. Now, lesh have one more card."

Cole stiffened as he saw Shuffles Yorbuss flick a card to old Flint Trone as the latter drew a sheet of creased paper from his calf-hide vest pocket, scrawled his signature on it, and shoved it out to cover the pile of gold coins, greenbacks, and poker chips in the middle of the green baize table.

Apparently the high stakes had crowded out the other players, and Trone had called for a show-down.

"I'm drawin' one," grunted Yorbuss. "An' callin' yuh."

The gambler's tapering yellow fingers moved with blurring speed, apparently taking a card from the deck held behind the mask of Yorbuss's other hand. But Lon Cole, who had watched plenty of card sharps play poker, knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that Yorbuss's card had slid from a loose cuff, not from the deck, as it seemed to the liquor-drugged boss of the Chain Circle.

A gasp went up as the two men showed their hands. Flint Trone had gambled his trail herd on three aces and two kings, a full house that would be hard to beat.

But Yorbuss, with a careless motion of his palm, fanned his own hand to expose four deuces and a jack.

"Reckon this pot's mine, ol'-timer," grunted Yorbuss, letting twin streams of cheroot smoke purl from his hawklike nostrils. "Tough luck—with you havin' a chance tuh draw the fourth ace."

Veins pumped hotly on Lon Cole's temple as he saw Yorbuss scoop the pot to his side of the table, his yellow fingers folding the bill of sale with great relish. Flint Trone was staring at the poker table, his bleary eyes filled with despair.

"The lousy snake!" thought Cole. "Cold-decked that pore ol' busky out of his hull beef herd—an' Trone too danged drunk tuh know he was cheated!"

A muscle twitched on Cole's jaw as he turned abruptly and pushed his way to the far end of the saloon. There, behind a partition of wire netting, was the Palo Verde post office, managed by a sleepy-eyed oldster who had been a friend of Cole's since boyhood.

"Howdy, Uncle Pinto," greeted the young waddy. "Reckon yuh got a registered letter from Wyomin' addressed tuh me, which same I would like tuh collect."

There were two letters, one addressed in Vola Raine's neat script. Without opening it, the cowboy thrust it into a pocket of his shirt, then slit open the other envelope. It contained a check in the amount of five hundred and fifty-eight dollars, the sum total of Cole's savings in Wyoming, money which he had kept in old War-horse Raine's safe on the Triple 6 Ranch.

Converting the certified check into greenbacks, Cole made certain a hundred-dollar bill was on the outside of the sizable roll. Then he made his way back to Yorbuss's poker table, twin six-guns swinging at his thighs.

As he arrived, old Flint Trone was just staggering up from his chair, the cold glaze of soberness replacing the feverish brightness of the alcoholic stupor which had claimed him a few minutes before.

"I—I cain't see—what made me do it!" the old stockman was babbling, despair making his voice shake. "Gamble my whole herd—my whole future—all agin' a lousy poker pot."

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Yorbuss's teeth glittered in a lip-curling sneer.

"Quit yore beefin' an' clear out fer a better sport tuh take yore place, Trone!" snarled the gambler ominously. "Take yore loss like a he-man, same as anybody else would!"

Trone stumbled off, brushing Lon Cole's shoulder as he passed.

Yorbuss glanced about at the onlookers, riffling his cards.

"Anybody want tuh set in Trone's chair?" he asked. "My luck's shore tuh bust."

They saw a grim-faced young waddy in Cheyenne-cut chaps, lace-front buckskin shirt, and coffee-colored Stetson ease himself into the rawhide chair vacated by the Circle Chain owner. The waddy was hardly of voting age, and his face was alight with a feverish excitement which the crowd took for eagerness to gamble.

"I'll buy twenty bucks o' chips in yore game, Yorbuss!" called the youth. "Lon Cole's the name, an' I'm in town tuh double my dinero!"

Hoarse laughter greeted Cole's challenge as an attendant brought Yorbuss a sealed deck. The gambler's eyes flickered with greedy lights as he caught sight of the hundred-dollar greenback on the outside of Lon Cole's wad of cash.

"A slick-ear playin' shorthorn stakes," commented the gambler, sucking smoke from his cheroot. "O. K., cowboy—if yuh feel that Lady Luck's flirtin' with yuh tuh-night, I'm game tuh buck yuh. Name yore game, an' cut the cyards fer deal—low man loses."

Coarse-voiced, dirty saloon bums crowded about, eager to see the gambler take this raw greenhorn into his web, strip him of his money, and kick him out of the game flat broke. They didn't notice that Lon Cole was loosening his Colts as he adjusted his holsters.

CHAPTER III.

SMOKING COLTS.

A HIGH-STAKES faro game was drawing most of the money over to a far corner of the Texicano Saloon, so that Shuffles Yorbuss was thankful for a chance to fleece the cool-voiced young stranger who had bought into his game.

As was his habit when confronted by a new player, Yorbuss scanned Cole sharply beneath the glare of the kerosene lamp which overhung the poker table from a ceiling beam.

He saw a ruggedly built young waddy whose hair had the bluish-black tint of a raven's wing where it showed beneath the pushed-back crown of his brown Stetson.

No trace of liquor was in the waddy's eyes or on his breath as he cut for the deal and won. Yet Yorbuss could see the pulse throbbing on Cole's bronzed neck, could see the tensed jaw muscles which revealed severe mental stress.

"A ringy young buckaroo makin' his first trip up Tombstone Trail, an' plumb shore his bunk-house poker playin' kin win fer him agin' a professional," analyzed the gambler as he raked in the cards which Lon Cole was dealing with a flourish which only emphasized his clumsiness at the game. "But he's got a sizable roll, an' we might as well garner it in."

The other players at the table had already formed their opinion of the excited young puncher. With a bank roll of sizable proportions, he was taken out of the bronc-twister class. Was he a rider of the out trails, fresh in town with the loot of some recent holdup?

"Reckon you was right about yore luck, Cole," grumbled Yorbuss as the waddy from Wyoming raked in the first pot with a carelessly played dou-

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ble pair, queen high. "Watch yore step, young feller. Luck like that cain't hold out ferever."

But Cole's luck continued to mount, especially on rounds in which Shuffles Yorbuss dealt the cards. For two hours, Cole won steadily, so that he played entirely with his winnings, never touching his original bank roll. Such was Yorbuss's clever intent, to instill a reckless spirit into the young waddy's playing.

At length, on the last draw of a round of heavy betting which had crowded out all except Yorbuss and the youth from Wyoming, the moment came for which the gambler had been pointing all evening.

"Yuh've dealt me a pat hand, son," commented Yorbuss, leaning forward to peer intently into Cole's eyes. "Supposin' we quit the penny-ante stuff an' bet our stacks. You got dinero in yore pocket thar, an' so've I. Yuh game tuh bet the roll?"

Cole hesitated, apparently unable to decide whether his own hand was worth the risk. Then he jabbed a finger toward Yorbuss's coat, which bulged with a sizable wallet.

"All my life I been honin' tuh own a cow herd o' my own," panted the waddy. "I seen yuh win the Circle Chain critters earlier this evenin'. I'm game tuh bet my hull roll agin' that bill o' sale."

Yorbuss stiffened, then relaxed. Thoughts raced in the depths of his poisonous brain, and a cunning light kindled in his greenish eyes. Why not bait the kid, then cold-deck him?

"Yo're on!" he rasped, stabbing a hand inside his coat pocket and opening his wallet to draw out Flint Trone's bill of sale. "Drop yore roll in the pot, son—I'm callin' yuh!"

Tense excitement made the onlookers crowd closer as they saw Lon Cole's thick roll of bills drop onto the folded bill of sale. What the crowd did not see was that Yorbuss's palm held his five cards as he returned the wallet to his inner pocket.

"*Hold it, Yorbuss!*"

Lon Cole moved with the unexpectedness of a striking rattler. His spurred heels kicked back his chair as he reached across the table with blurring speed, to lock Yorbuss's arm with his left hand even as the gambler was replacing his wallet in his coat pocket.

With a jerking motion, Cole yanked the gambler's arm out into the open, to reveal five cards clutched tightly in Yorbuss's hand. At the same instant, the waddy's right hand plummeted to his side and lifted a .45 six-gun above the table, muzzle leveled at Yorbuss's heaving chest.

"What in blazes is the idea, hombre?" choked the gambler, dropping his cards under the viselike pressure of Cole's fingers.

"Jest this, tinhorn!" snarled the waddy, his voice barely reaching the ears of the listeners. "When you put yore wallet back in yore pocket, yuh had the cards I dealt yuh with the backs agin' yore fingers. This hand yuh pulled out from behind yore coat has the *spots* facin' yore fingers. How come yuh twirled 'em—unless yo're a magician?"

Before Yorbuss could open his jaw on a reply, Lon Cole's left hand unclenched from the gambler's arm, jabbed into Yorbuss's pocket and drew forth the wallet with five more playing cards nestled against the leather folder!

"This new hand has been in yore pocket all evenin', busky!" snarled Cole, leaning back. "You had some confederate planted behind me tuh let yuh know that my hand didn't contain any duplicate cards o' this set you jest tried tuh palm off on me!"

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With the words, Lon Cole reached down to turn over the fake hand which Yorbuss had drawn from his pocket. It was a royal flush in hearts, the supreme hand at poker.

With the same swift grace, Cole turned over the cards he had dealt Yorbuss, and revealed a measly pair of jacks and three worthless clubs.

"*That's* the hand you called 'pat'!" snarled Cole. "That proves you tried tuh cold-deck me, even if findin' that other set o' cards in yore pocket doesn't. I got three treys in my hand, which same wins the pot."

Watching Yorbuss's twisting face as he spoke, Lon Cole caught the warning glance which the gambler shot behind him.

Whirling, Cole was in time to dodge a down-coming Colt barrel wielded by a half-breed whom Yorbuss had planted behind Cole's chair to spy on his cards.

Crash! Cole's outthrust Colt dented the half-breed's ribs. Before the breed could sag back against the onlookers, the waddy from Wyoming had swung his .45 around to cover Yorbuss, even as the gambler lifted his arms to get his sleeve guns into the clear.

Br-r-rang! Cole's slug bored a neat hole through Yorbuss's right ear, paralyzing the gambler before he could jerk the triggers of his .44 hide-out guns.

Then, firing so swiftly on the heels of the first shot that the concussions came as one jarring crash of thunder, Lon Cole tilted his Peacemaker to put a slug through the chimney of the coal-oil lamp which illuminated the poker table.

In the pandemonium which followed the crashing of glass from the lamp, Lon Cole dived his way through panic-stricken onlookers, leaped to a vacant poker table near the wall and dived through an open window overlooking an alley between the Texicano and a livery barn.

As swift as a ghost, Lon Cole sped through the pitch blackness of the night. Down the alley, he ducked into the livery barn. By the light of a smoky lantern he sought out Rojo, his strawberry roan. He was tightening the cinch of his Wyoming saddle when the excited hostler rushed down to the stalls to investigate.

"Whar's the Circle Chain beef herd bedded down, *muchacho?*" demanded the waddy, pressing a five-dollar bill into the hostler's hand as he swung into the saddle. "The herd Flint Trone owns?"

"Señor Trone ees camped at the Gunman's Ghost Hangtree."

Without pausing to thank the Mexican kid for the information, Cole spurred out into the livery's rear corral and cleared the fence with a soaring jump he had taught Rojo when the roan was a colt.

"Yorbuss kin count hisself lucky I jest nicked his ear tuh-night," laughed the waddy as he sent the roan galloping into the night in the direction of Flint Trone's bedground. "With his derringers about tuh blaze, I should 'a' salivated the skunk."

Lon Cole patted a lump in his buckskin shirt pocket. It was his own bank roll, and the bill of sale to the Circle Chain beef herd which he had lawfully won with a superior hand of poker. They had been all he had had time to snatch up from the money-littered table prior to his gun-smoke get-away from the Texicano Saloon. The rest of the pot had been rightfully his, but with Yorbuss's gun-slingers planted in the crowd, Cole realized it would have been suicide to have lingered long enough to scoop up his winnings.

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CHAPTER IV.

FLINT TRONE REPENTS.

IT took grizzled old Flint Trone a good two hours before he could muster the courage to mount his coal-black mustang and head out of Palo Verde in the direction of Gunman's Ghost Hangtree, a famous landmark of the trail town where the Circle Chain camp was pitched. It was the blackest night of Trone's tempestuous career.

Despair and defeat gnawed at the old cattleman's heart as he realized with a numb sensation that he was worse than penniless.

"All my life I been hog-tied by my gamblin' fever," moaned the rancher, tears dripping down his scarred old cheeks as he rode slumped in the saddle across the starlit plain. "It's worse'n bein' a drunkard, ten times over. It's more like bein' a danged dope fiend, not bein' able tuh keep my money in my pants whenever I see a poker game goin' on."

In mind's eye, Flint Trone reviewed the highlights of his checkered life. As a kid he had been a reckless gambler, always broke because of his rotten luck at cards or dice, yet never able to withstand the temptation to gamble whenever the opportunity presented itself.

Then he had married a descendant of one of the bluff old pioneers who, under Houston, had helped win the Lone Star State from the clutches of its Mexican tyrants.

"Marthy ironed me out," he muttered, knuckling his misty eyes and trying to straighten his shoulders. "She kept me from gamblin', an' between us we built up the Circle Chain until it was the best blamed spread in Deef Smith County. We was aimin' to retire once I sold this year's beef herd. An' now——"

The old man choked, unable to face the fact that in a moment of drunken excitement he had played his entire beef herd in Yorbuss's poker session and had lost.

With that bill of sale had gone his hopes of the future—his chances of getting the Circle Chain out of debt, following terrific losses in the drought seasons in years past.

"I—I jest cain't face her," Trone murmured as he caught sight of the hill topped by the Gunman's Ghost Hangtree, where the Circle Chain chuck wagon was camped. "It's goin' tuh be hard enough lettin' my crew know that I ain't their boss no more—that a blasted card sharp will send out a foreman tuh drive our steers up tuh Longhorn City."

Slowly Trone's mustang climbed the ridge until he made out the spidery arms of the dead cottonwood under which the Circle Chain wagons were standing.

As he dismounted and stumbled his way toward a crackling camp fire he made out the crouched figure of the ranch cook, a bald-headed old darky named "Flapjack," busy stoking the fire with brush. Flapjack was trembling like a man inflicted with ague.

The Negro cook jumped to his feet and rushed forward as he saw his genial old boss approaching through the firelight.

"B-boss, Ah wishes you'd let me sleep somewhars else tuh-night, Ah sho' does!" moaned the old darky, his eyeballs rolling whitely in the starlight as he pointed toward the dead cottonwood. "Yo'-all knows the story back o' dis tree, don' yuh? How Trigger Pete, de bad man, was hung on dat limb yonder, an' how his ghost h'ants dis place eber since?"

Trone shook his head numbly as he listened to the old cook babble on concerning the superstitious legend

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of Gunman's Ghost Hangtree. Ever since the notorious desperado, "Trigger Pete," had been lynched under that tree several years before, cowboys had come into Palo Verde with stories of having seen the old bad man's ghost hovering about the scene, his six-guns glittering in the light of the full moon.

That was why, in fact, they had been able to camp on the deserted hill where drainage was good and where the crew could get their grub and still be able to see the big Circle Chain herd bedded down on the sagebrush flats beyond the hill.

"Shut yore big mouth, Flapjack," groaned Flint Trone, cutting off the Negro's excited story. "I ain't got time tuh listen tuh any fool yarns about the Gunman's Ghost. Flapjack, I ain't yore boss no more. You kin sleep anywhere you like. I ain't got no authority tuh tell yuh nothin'."

Flapjack's big lips sagged in amazement at Trone's words, completely forgetting his superstitious horror of the "haunted" camp ground. The grief in Trone's voice scared the old cook.

"What yo'-all mean, boss? You owns de Circle Chain, don' yuh? An' dis yere is de Circle Chain camp, ain't it? Yuh don' mean yo're firin' me fer bein' skeered, does yuh?"

Trone shook his head like a man in a nightmare.

"No, Flapjack. But tuh-night—I—I got drunk an' intuh a poker game. A tinhorn gambler over at the Texicano bar talked me intuh wagerin' my bill o' sale tuh this herd an'—an' I lost. Them steers belongs tuh a yahoo named Shuffles Yorbuss, now."

The Negro gulped hard as he saw his aged boss turn and shuffle off in the direction of the bed-roll wagon, his shoulders quivering with broken sobs.

A rattle of hoofbeats made the old darky spin about a few moments later. Up toward the camp fire came a rider spurring a strawberry roan hard up the slope. For a moment of wild panic the Negro wondered if this was the phantom figure of Trigger Pete returning to the tree where he had been executed five decades before.

Then he saw a buckskin-shirted young cow-puncher ride up and fling himself from the stirrups, his mouth twisted in a wide grin.

"This the Circle Chain camp, pardner?"

Flapjack nodded, eying the stranger's cartridge-studded gun belts in awe.

"Is yore boss, Flint Trone, back from town yet?"

Flapjack pointed toward the bed-roll wagon on the far side of the Gunman's Ghost Hangtree.

"He sho' is, stranger. He jest went over dar to git his soogans an' turn in fer de night, Ah reckon."

Lon Cole grounded his roan's bridle reins and made his way out of the circle of firelight toward the bed-roll wagon.

A moment later he made out the form of the old codger he had seen in the Texicano Saloon in the early part of the evening. The old man was on his knees, and in one blue-veined old fist was clutched a long-barreled Colt six-gun. From his posture, Cole judged that Trone was praying, his back to the cowboy's approach.

Then Cole picked up what the old stock boss was mumbling into the night.

"Fergive me—fer doin' this, Marthy. But I—I jest cain't bear—the

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look on yore face, when I gits back tuh the spread an'—an' tells yuh that I let yuh down."

So saying, the Circle Chain rancher lifted the .45 and pressed the muzzle under his right ear, against the cord of his neck.

With a yell, Lon Cole leaped forward, one kangaroo-leather boot lashed out to kick the six-gun from Trone's grasp. Even as he kicked the barrel away Trone pulled trigger, and the flash of gunpowder singed the silvery hair at his temple as the .45 slug smashed through a hickory spoke of the bed wagon's hind wheel.

"Yuh ol' coot!" yelled Lon Cole, seizing Trone by the armpit and yanking him to his feet. "Are yuh loco or dead drunk, fixin' tuh commit suicide that a way?"

Indeed, Trone's glazed eyes reminded Cole of an insane man as the old man faced him, his goatlike beard trembling, his face etched in scarlet and black from the dancing flames of Flapjack's camp fire beyond the hangman's tree.

"You was killin' yoreself on account o' losin' yore beef, I take it!" rasped Lon Cole. "Waal, old-timer, yuh kin fergit that poker game an' l'arn yore lesson. Hyar's yore bill o' sale!"

Trone stared down at the piece of folded paper which Lon Cole thrust into his quivering hand, then up into the waddy's grinning countenance.

"How—how—— I don't savvy this——"

"Yuh don't have tuh, old-timer. I happen tuh know that Shuffles Yorbuss cold-decked yuh tuh-night tuh win that bill o' sale. So I trapped him at his own crooked game an' won that paper back with an honest deal o' my own. The Circle Chain critters are back in yore possession, Trone, an' yore family won't ever have tuh know about yore little poker session with Yorbuss!"

CHAPTER V.

BULLET-PUNCHED LETTER.

FOR a long minute Flint Trone stared into the grinning face of the strange cowboy who had galloped up out of the night to visit his camp.

"I—I don't no-way savvy, younker," choked the old man at last. "I recalls seein' yuh at the Texicano tuh-night, all right. Yuh say—yuh say Yorbuss cold-decked me?"

The cowboy nodded.

"Beat yore hand with a card he had up his sleeve, only you was too drunk tuh notice it, Trone," explained Cole. "I figgered the only way tuh git that bill o' sale back without shootin' Yorbuss would be tuh win it in a poker game—an' that's what I proceeded tuh do, plumb legal an' above board!"

Lon Cole did not see fit to explain to the Circle Chain boss that he had made a hasty departure from Palo Verde's saloon with the echo of gunshots resounding in his ears.

In all probability, a sheriff would be looking for Cole on the morrow, for Yorbuss no doubt had plenty of witnesses of his own to testify that Cole had stolen the bill of sale at gun's point, and that the bullet hole in Yorbuss's ear had not been an intentional miss on the cowboy's part, but instead had been a bullet intended for his brain.

"Then—then if you won this bill o' sale, it's yourn, son!" protested Flint Trone. "I ain't got no right tuh—tuh this paper, if you won it from that Yorbuss polecat!"

The waddy laughed, his nerves relaxing perceptibly as he saw Trone

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hobble his way back toward the camp fire, all thoughts of suicide put out of his mind.

"Them steers belong tuh you, Trone," he insisted. "What would I do with 'em? The closest I ever come tuh ownin' a cattle herd was a few seasons back when I used tuh have jobs as trail boss, hazin' mossh-horns up Tombstone Trail tuh Dodge. It's a cinch I ain't had the experience tuh dicker with them cattle buyers up thar in Kansas an' make a profit fer myself. They'd trim me as bad as Yorbuss trimmed you, pardner."

Trone tugged at his billy-goat whiskers, his mouth twitching with emotion. He stared into the camp fire, which Flapjack was still heaping with sagebrush and cow chips in a laborious effort at scaring away Trigger Pete's famous galloping spook.

"Yuh say yuh know Tombstone Trail, son?"

"Shore do—from hyar tuh Longhorn City."

Flint Trone pointed off down the slope leading away from the direction of Palo Verde, to where a dark, sprawling mass in the starlight revealed the position of the bedded-down Circle Chain beefstuff.

"I got two thousand-odd head o' whitefaces down thar, son—steers with just enough Hereford in 'em tuh make 'em weigh in the heaviest at Longhorn. Likely we'll add four-five hunderd critters from the strays we pick up along Tombstone Trail. Yuh reckon yuh'd be able tuh act as trail boss fer me—with a thirty-per-cent cut o' what we gross at the railway pens?"

Visions of the Lazy Arrow outfit and Vola Raine flashed through the cowprod's mind. Yet he had heard enough about the Circle Chain to know that Trone would need all his season's profit to make ends meet down at his ranch south of Amarillo.

"Yo're jest tryin' tuh even things up fer me gittin' yore bill o' sale back, ol'-timer!" accused the waddy good-naturedly. "Thirty per cent o' what that herd will bring would be ninety cents on the dollar more'n a trail boss would be worth, an' you know it."

Trone squirmed uncomfortably.

"I been tryin' tuh pick up a trail boss," he protested. "My own *segundo* gits loco drunk at ever' town we pass an' holds us up. We got bad grass ahead an' rivers tuh ford, an' I need a good ranny tuh ramrod things fer me. Unless you take the job, at my terms, I—I ain't acceptin' this bill o' sale, son."

From the finality in the old stockman's voice, Lon Cole knew the stubborn ranch boss meant what he said.

"O. K., startin' to-morrow I'll be yore Tombstone trail boss," he agreed as the two shook hands. "An' now, it bein' close on tuh midnight, could yuh tell me whar yore crew beds down?"

Trone pointed down the hillside toward the herd.

"Our remuda o' cow ponies is down thar in a brush corral," he said, "an' on the uphill side o' the corral yuh'll find yore trail mates asleep, except fer the nighthawks. An', son, I'll see to it that yuh never regret signin' on with the Circle Chain!"

Lon Cole went over to where his horse was ground-anchored and picked up his reins.

As he did so he suddenly remembered the letter from Vola Raine which still rested unopened in his shirt pocket.

"I'll be rattlin' my hocks down

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thar pronto," he told Trone, "but first off I'll borrow yore cook's camp fire hyar tuh read a letter by."

Trone nodded agreement, sat down beside the Negro, and began rolling a quirly. Cole walked over closer to the fire, took out Vola Raine's letter, and slit the envelope.

By the guttering light the waddy read:

DEAR LON,

Mr. Surfman pushed me back into the post office so soon after your fight with Shag Crockett that I didn't get to see you, and by the time I had recovered my wits, daddy told me you had left the country.

I just wanted you to know, Lon, that I hold you blameless for having to kill that desperado in self-defense, even though I didn't get to tell you so before you left.

Daddy told me what you said about making a stake on Tombstone Trail and coming back here to buy the Lazy Arrow, and that news helped soothe the sting of knowing you had left Wyoming.

Be careful, Lon, and remember, I'll be waiting for you always. VOLA.

Squatting by the warmth of the camp fire, Lon Cole felt a new zest surge through his veins, and his shoulders straightened as if a great burden had been lifted from them.

"Vola," he vowed into the night, "I'll be back this fall with enough dinero tuh git a mortgage tuh that little spread if I have tuh——"

Br-r-rang! The stillness of the night collapsed in a roar of sound, and the sheet of paper in Cole's hand twitched as a six-gun bullet perforated the girl's signature.

Hands stabbing to gun butts, the young trail boss whirled about in time to see the phantomlike forms of half a dozen mounted gunmen charging up out of the night from the direction of Palo Verde.

The leader of the oncoming attackers had a head swathed in bandages, which told Lon Cole that the Texicano gambler, Shuffles Yorbuss, had followed him to the Circle Chain camp to square accounts for the shooting in the cow-town gambling hall.

CHAPTER VI.

GUNMAN'S GHOST HANGTREE.

HOT lead seared across Lon Cole's forearm and diverted his first burst of shots as he rolled to the ground and jerked triggers at the oncoming horsemen.

With a hoarse yell, Shuffles Yorbuss reined to the right to circle around the north side of the camp, his mounted gun hawks galloping at top speed behind him.

Flint Trone bounced to his feet in the act of lighting a cigarette and clawed for his six-guns as he recognized the killer crew from the Texicano.

"Merciful hebbins!"

With a womanlike scream of horror, the Negro cook vaulted the tongue of the chuck wagon and vanished behind the wagon, howling with terror. To Flapjack's overwrought imagination, the cow-town attackers could be none other than the phantom Trigger Pete and his ghost riders.

Br-r-rang! Bang-bang! Flint Trone's battered old .45, the mate to the Peacemaker he had intended killing himself with over by the bed-roll wagon, was chattering like exploding firecrackers.

The old Circle Chain boss shrieked with delight as he saw a rider topple from saddle as Yorbuss led his midnight raiders in a tight circle of the little camp under the spreading branches of the Gunman's Ghost Hangtree.

Bang-bang-bang! The night resounded with shots. Billowing gun smoke drifted in pink smudges on

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the outskirts of the camp, smoke tinted by the flames of the Negro cook's fire.

Hoofs thundered as Lon Cole lay flat on his stomach and crawled for the chuck wagon in a frantic effort to get away from the circle of firelight which had tagged him an easy target for Yorbuss's killers.

Shoving his smoking Colt through the spokes of the wagon wheel, Cole fired at a blurring figure which he recognized as the half-breed he had smashed in the ribs for spying on his cards in the poker game over at the Texicano that night.

In the act of sending a shot at old Flint Trone's back, the half-breed collapsed from his saddle and landed like a sack of spuds in the sagebrush, his lung drilled by Cole's slug.

Struggling to his knees, the half-breed's stubby-barreled six-gun blazed point-blank at the spot where Cole crouched by the shadow of the wagon, the slug chewing hickory slivers out of the wagon hub.

Brang! Cole's second bullet dumped the half-breed on his back, his skull drilled with streaking lead.

Then Cole's .45s swung to follow the bandaged head which he knew was Yorbuss's, out in the gloom beyond the firelight. He was unable to shoot because Yorbuss had put Cole's strawberry roan in the line of fire.

It was hard, shooting at the wraithlike figures of the raiders from Palo Verde when their eyes were blinded by the bonfire which Flapjack had built to ward off spirits.

Then a crackling in the dried grama grass behind the chuck wagon warned Cole of peril, and he whirled about in time to see a livid-faced saloon gun-hawk crawling up behind him, his Colt upraised like a club.

Too late, Cole tried to whip a gun into position for a close-range shot.

Whiz! The gun hawk's .45 barrel whizzed down, striking Cole in the cheek bone and flopping him on his side in the dirt, his senses reeling. Dimly he was aware that his guns were being jerked out of his hands.

There was a triumphant bellow from Yorbuss as the circling riders saw old man Trone frantically breaking open his fuming Colt to reload.

In the interval while the Chain boss struggled to thumb loads out of his shell belts to stuff into the hot chambers of his lone six-gun, Yorbuss came spurring into the firelighted camp ground, his horse's deadly hoofs heading straight for the old stockman.

Leaping out of the way, Flint Trone was an easy victim for the down-swinging rifle which Yorbuss held. The walnut stock crashed like a bludgeon against Trone's skull, and the ranchman sprawled unconscious on the ground.

"'*Sta bien*, men!" yelled Shuffles Yorbuss, his coat tails bannering as he leaped from his horse and pounced upon the prone rancher like a tiger upon his quarry. "Reckon we got 'em whar we kin handle 'em now!"

The other riders came spurring in, broad grins on their faces as they dismounted.

Struggling to keep his senses from sliding into a black pit of oblivion, Lon Cole felt himself being jerked to his feet by the hairy-jawed ruffian who had sneaked upon him from behind, a ruse which had been completely successful.

By the dancing scarlet flames of the camp fire, Lon Cole saw Shuffles Yorbuss going through Trone's pockets with long-fingered hands.

A moment later Yorbuss held up

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what he was looking for—the bill of sale which he had had in his possession earlier in the evening.

"*Muy bueno,*" cackled the gambler, his eyes lighting fiendishly as he restored the bill of sale to the familiar wallet. "Now we're ready tuh go on with the evening's business, gents!"

One of the raiders went over to the chuck wagon and tested the spigot of the eighty-gallon hogshead which the wagon carried as a water supply for cooking on dry trails.

No water came from the spigot, so the outlaw picked up a near-by kettle filled with water and brought it over to douse the entire contents on Flint Trone's face.

Spluttering profanity, the Circle Chain owner blinked himself back to his senses and looked about at the fence of outlaw legs which surrounded them.

"Howdy, Trone!" jeered the gambler, jarring the old man's head with a slap. "Sent one o' yore boogery cowhands down tuh the saloon tuh git back yore bill o' sale, eh? Waal, it was a fatal mistake fer you tuh make, hombre. Shuffles Yorbuss don't let any slick-ear waddy run a shenanigan on him, not by a long shot. An' the two of yuh are goin' tuh pay fer tuh-night's monkey-business by stretchin' rope!"

Trone was jerked to his feet and shoved shoulder to shoulder with Lon Cole, whose eyes were still filmed with semiconsciousness.

The two prisoners looked at each other in despair as they felt their hands jerked behind their backs. Lariat ropes were produced, and in a few moments Trone and Lon Cole found their arms securely trussed behind them.

"You ain't gittin' my herd, blast yuh!" snarled Flint Trone. "I got fifteen hard-shootin' cowhands down the hill guardin' them whitefaces, an' they won't turn 'em over tuh no set o' tinhorns from a saloon!"

Yorbuss guffawed and turned to his sombreroed riders.

"Lance, you an' the others git along down the hill an' stampede that herd. Come daylight, we'll collect them Circle Chain steers an' start workin' 'em north up Tombstone Trail, them steers belongin' tuh me legal!"

Yorbuss turned to face his prisoners as the other outlaws mounted and headed down the hill to lose themselves in the night. The brief gun battle had no doubt roused the sleeping cow-punchers who worked for Trone, but it would be an easy matter for Yorbuss's rustlers to charge the rim of the herd, shoot down the nighthawks who might attempt resistance, and stampede the bedded-down cattle.

"Trone," began the gambler, squinting at the cottonwood overhead, "I reckon you made a plumb bad mistake campin' on this particular spot. Didn't you know Trigger Pete's ghost ramrodded this place, an' that it's bad luck tuh camp hyar?"

Trone's goat whiskers shook as he struggled to keep his courage and defy the leering outlaw.

"Bad hombres o' yore stripe cain't be likened tuh Trigger Pete," rasped the old man. "Trigger Pete warn't yellow, but he ended up with a rope around his neck—the same as you're goin' tuh do if you try chousin' my beef herd tuh-night!"

For reply, Yorbuss made his way across the camp ground to where Cole's roan, Rojo, was pawing the ground nervously. Leading the cow pony back to where Cole and Trone stood, Yorbuss jerked out a six-gun.

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A few moments later old Flint Trone and Cole had been boosted atop Rojo, and Yorbuss was tying the pair together by means of Cole's lariat wrapped around their waists and securely knotted.

That done, Yorbuss led the double-mounted pony over to the trunk of the Gunman's Ghost Hangtree, and for the first time the two prisoners had an inkling of the double-cross game Yorbuss was playing.

Uncoiling a pair of lariats which hung on the box of the Circle Chain wagon, Yorbuss deftly flicked a noose over each of their heads and drew the hondo tight about their necks.

"Come mornin', the sheriff is goin' tuh find you two buskies swingin' from the ol' Hangtree!" chuckled Yorbuss. "The Mexes will think Trigger Pete's ghost done the stunt —an' the sheriff won't know who in blazes done it. I'll tell him the two of yuh was hangin' hyar when I come tuh claim my cattle herd!"

Despair froze the veins of the two men as Yorbuss flipped the loose ends of the hang ropes over a gnarled limb of the dead cottonwood —the very limb under which the stormy career of Trigger Pete, the terror of old-time Palo Verde, had come to its finish.

Drawing the lariats tight, Yorbuss knotted them securely to the iron-tired rear wheel of the chuck wagon.

Lon Cole, helpless in his saddle, could feel the vibration of Trone's wizened old frame as the rancher's heart slammed in his chest. The younger waddy felt sweat oozing from his pores, as he realized his pulse was beating out the final half minute of his life.

Yorbuss crossed the camp ground and mounted his coal-black mustang. When he spurred over to where the two prisoners sat Rojo's back with the hang ropes chafing the flesh of their throats, Cole noticed that a quirt dangled from the gambler's wrist.

"An' now, I'll be larrupin' that roan o' yourn, Cole," grated the outlaw. "One jump an it'll leave the two of yuh danglin' from that limb with yore necks broke an' I'll——"

Yorbuss broke off, cocking his ear as a crackle of far-off gunshots reached his ears from down on the plain below the ridge. Six-guns flashed in the night, and Cole and Trone knew that Yorbuss's rustlers were carrying out their mission of stampeding the Circle Chain herd.

Following the gunshots came the distance-muted rattle of hoofs as the outlaw raiders spurred to safety. Then the night rumbled with the thunder of roused steers, startled yells from the surprised night riders, and a swelling roar of sound as two thousand panicked critters got their feet in motion, horns clacking against horns in a dread rhythm that spelled that most dreaded catastrophe of the cattle trails—stampede.

"That's yore bowin'-out music, amigos!" snarled Shuffles Yorbuss. "Hyar's tuh a quick trip tuh blazes fer the two of yuh!"

So saying, the evil-hearted gambler from Palo Verde lifted his quirt for the downward lash which would send Rojo jumping out from under his two riders, leaving them dangling with snapped necks under hangman's ropes.

CHAPTER VII.

INVISIBLE GUNMAN.

AND then, even as Yorbuss raised the fatal whip an incredible thing happened.

Cr-r-rang! A shot rang out from close at hand, a shot that had an

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ear-stunning volume such as a small cannon might produce.

Z-z-zt! A slug sped between Shuffles Yorbuss's upraised arm and head and caused the outlaw to drop his quirt from nerveless fingers.

Both horses stirred nervously, and Lon Cole called out a reassuring cry to his strawberry roan as he felt the gagging pressure of the hang rope tighten about his Adam's apple.

"Who fired that?"

Whipping Colts from holsters, Yorbuss spurred away from his prisoners' horse, his eyes probing the gloom, seeking to penetrate the wall of blackness which lay outside the well of orange light cast by the crackling fire.

Br-r-rang! Again the booming crash of a gunshot roared out, and a slug hit the dirt under Yorbuss's horse and sprayed the animal's belly with sand and pebbles.

With a startled yell the outlaw wheeled his horse in a complete circle, looking for a sign of the gunman he knew must be near at hand. But there was no one visible anywhere around the ghostly cottonwood!

"By gosh—it sounds like a stick o' dynamite lettin' off!" yelled the mystified outlaw. "Thar ain't no brush fer any ambusher tuh hide behind up hyar on the hill."

Bo-o-om! A third shot sent a bullet whistling over Yorbuss's head, and from the angle the befuddled outlaw knew that the invisible gunman must be firing from behind the chuck wagon.

Guns uplifted, the gambler sent his mustang charging at a full gallop around the far side of the wagons, but no trace of a lurking figure did he see.

Firelight painted the two wagons with crimson, making every detail of them clearly visible to the dismayed gambler.

Peering down into the empty bed wagon, Yorbuss saw that no man was hiding under the rim of the box. Halting his bronc at the front end of the chuck wagon, he had a clear view of the pots and pans and boxes of food supplies which filled that vehicle.

There was no possible spot where a gunman could be hiding, so far as Yorbuss could tell—yet three ghostly bullets had roared out, all clearly aimed at him!

Yorbuss's face went the color of chalk as he peered frantically around the rim of the firelight area surrounding the Gunman's Ghost Hangtree. Yet there was no one about save the two prisoners who sat on Cole's strawberry roan, their own bodies helpless in their rope binding.

"Yuh better be vamosin', Yorbuss!" advised Lon Cole, his voice lifting above the roar of the stampeding cattle herd down on the plain. "I got a hunch yo're bein' attacked by the ghost o' Trigger Pete—he's supposed tuh haunt this hyar cottonwood!"

Cole saw Yorbuss's face contort with terror as he spurred his bronc back alongside the camp fire, his neck twisting this way and that in a frantic effort to spot some darting killer. His eyes scanned the grim, gnarled branches of the cottonwood, but the dead tree was sharply outlined in scarlet against the star-powdered Texas sky, and the broken branches offered no hiding place for even a midget gunman.

"By blazes—I'm seein' you two swing afore I leave!" bawled the gambler, charging his horse toward Rojo. "I'm thinkin' them shots jest come from my own boys down the hill, by accid——"

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Br-r-rom! A fourth shot made Yorbuss's black sombrero go kiting off into the camp fire where the flames attacked it greedily. At the same time the distinct odor of gun smoke reached the outlaw's nostrils, and yet his eyes failed to pick up any telltale smudge from the invisible gun.

"It's Trigger Pete's spook!" screamed the outlaw, his eyes bulging as he saw his bullet-perforated sombrero turning into flame on the rim of the camp fire. "Then them stories I've heard about Trigger Pete ain't been loco!"

Br-rang! Again the night rocked to the crash of a bullet from somewhere close at hand, and the whine of the missile was uncomfortably close to Yorbuss's ear.

The gambler waited to hear no more. Legend had it that Trigger Pete could not miss with the sixth and final shot in the chambers of his notorious six-gun—and now Trigger Pete's sixth bullet was due pronto.

Gouging in the spurs, Shuffles Yorbuss headed down the western slope of the ridge, bending low in the saddle and raking his mustang to the utmost notch of its gait as he vanished in the direction of Palo Verde.

Lon Cole and Flint Trone, mute witnesses to the gunfire which had so mysteriously saved them on the brink of doom, stared about the deserted camp ground in bewilderment almost as profound as had been the gambler's.

"This is beginnin' tuh stick in my craw, son!" stammered Flint Trone, shivering in spite of himself. "Ever since I was a kid knee-high to a leppie I've heard waddies tell how they've seen an' heard Trigger Pete's ghost goin' through his target practice up hyar by the tree whar he died—an' blamed if this don't make me wonder!"

Lon Cole's eyes swept the rim of the area of firelight, hoping to pick up the sign of whoever had pulled the mystery trigger that had sent Shuffles Yorbuss fleeing from a gunman he could not fight back.

"It's got me down," panted the waddy from Wyoming. "I kin sniff the gun smoke plain as day, an' yet we know, same as Yorbuss knows, that nobody's in the bed wagon or the chuck wagon, an' nobody's under them wagons, an' nobody's up that cottonwood. Then how——"

Lon Cole's shuttling glance passed over the chuck wagon, and as it did so, the waddy caught sight of the lid of the big eighty-gallon water barrel shifting ever so slightly.

Then, out of his confused memory, leaped a picture of one of Yorbuss's raiders going over to the water hogshead and turning the spigot, when he sought water to revive old man Trone. Finding the big barrel empty, the outlaw had picked up a near-by water kettle instead and doused its contents on Trone's head.

"I'm beginnin' tuh savvy this Gunman's Ghost business, boss!" chuckled Lon Cole as he saw the lid of the barrel lift an inch or so higher and a pair of bulbous white eyes appear against the black background of the barrel's lid.

Raising his voice, Lon Cole called out:

"Crawl out o' there, son! You've shore done yore good turn tuh-night, even if we did think you'd coyoted on us!"

From the huge barrel came the querulous voice of Flapjack, the Circle Chain cook.

"Is yo' sho' dat dar bad hombre am gone, boss?"

Flint Trone stiffened in his ropes, and then threw back his head to give vent to riotous laughter.

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"Yorbuss has prob'ly passed through Palo Verde so fast the brush is bent over from the wind o' his passin', Flapjack!" gasped the Circle Chain boss when he could recover himself. "Come on out o' there, yuh woolly-headed ol' pardner, an' untie these ropes!"

The two men on the roan watched in mingled amusement and relief as they saw the lanky Negro climb out of the empty hogshead and leap to the ground. Jabbed in the waistband of the darky's overalls was an old-fashioned single-action Colt .44.

"When dem riders attacked us tuh-night," explained Flapjack as he untied the two hang ropes from the wagon wheel, "Ah was sho' it was dat Trigger Pete man's ghost comin' wid his spook pards. So I lit a shuck around' de waggin, an' den I seen they was circlin' us an' dat I'd git de seat ob my britches filled with buckshot if I kept runnin'."

Lon Cole laughed uproariously as he felt the hangman's noose loosen from his neck as the Negro shuffled forward.

"So you hid in that empty water bar'l, eh?" chuckled the cowboy. "An' then you fired through the bunghole after knockin' that wooden spigot out—an' danged near salivated Yorbuss, at that!"

Flapjack, busy untying the ropes which bound the two men together, wagged his woolly head sorrowfully.

"As a rule I'm a good shot, yes, suh!" he protested. "But it was all-fired hard tuh aim jest by the sound o' whar that skunk was, an' shoot through de bunghole ob dat bar'l. De noise ob dat gun is still ringin' in my yeres, boss."

A few minutes later the two men were climbing down out of the stirrups and were shaking the Negro's hand and slapping his back in heartfelt gratitude.

Flapjack's cowardice and the speed with which he had hidden in the empty hogshead at the end of the chuck wagon had saved their lives, that night—coupled with the weird legends about Trigger Pete, which Yorbuss had had actual "proof" were true!

"Things still ain't so good, Trone," said Cole when he had recovered his guns from where they had been tossed under the chuck wagon by their attackers. "Yore herd has been stampeded so's tuh give Yorbuss's riders time tuh round 'em up an' fight us off come mornin', afore we kin drive 'em north."

Trone nodded ruefully and scratched his lariat-burned neck.

"An' Yorbuss still has the bill o' sale tuh them critters," muttered the oldster. "Plenty o' people in the Texicano seen him win that bill o' sale from me—an' them same people will testify you stole it after shootin' Yorbuss's ear off."

Cole nodded seriously. He knew how impossible it would be for Trone to market his beefstuff up in Longhorn City when another man possessed the legal papers proving that the trail herd was his.

"Listen, boss," said Lon Cole, hitching his cartridge belts in a grim gesture of determination. "Tuh-night, afore all this ruckus started, you hired me as trail boss. As such, it's my responsibility tuh see that them Circle Chain whitefaces gits up tuh the other end o' Tombstone Trail."

Trone nodded dubiously.

"But it'll take us all day tuh-morrow roundin' up them cattle, after what them raiders did tuh-night, scatterin' 'em over the sagebrush. An' I ain't so shore my waddies will match their guns agin' Yorbuss's riders, when they come out tuh-morrow

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tuh take over possession o' them cattle."

Lon Cole's mouth twisted into a grim line.

"Yorbuss was clever, stampedin' them cattle so's tuh prevent yore men from drivin' 'em north when it gits daylight," admitted Cole. "It'll give Yorbuss time enough tuh whip together a crew of owl-hoot punchers who'd haze them whitefaces up tuh Dodge. But he wouldn't have a leg tuh stand on legally if I could git that bill o' sale back, Trone. An' that's jest what I intends tuh——"

Approaching hoofbeats made the waddy break off, his ears strained attentively.

"Merciful hebbens!" moaned Flapjack, his teeth clattering in his head. "Dat mus' be Trigger Pete's spook a-comin' fer sho'!"

Cole shot a glance at the dying fire, then at the shadowy gulf between the two wagons over under the Gunman's Ghost tree.

"Quick, pards!" ordered the Tombstone Trail boss, grabbing the darky and Flint Trone by the arm. "We got tuh hide until we're shore that's our Circle Chain riders comin' up hyar!"

Quickly the three men leaped behind the shelter of the chuck wagon. Less than a minute had elapsed before half a dozen gun-toting riders drifted out of the night and dismounted near the smoldering camp fire.

They were Shuffles Yorbuss's gunmen, returning from the job of stampeding Trone's herd!

CHAPTER VIII.

NIPPING A RANGE WAR.

LON COLE clamped a palm over Flapjack's mouth to keep the Negro's terrified breathing from reaching the ears of the six owl-hooters who were glancing curiously about, over by the fire.

They were six-to-one odds for Cole to buck, for the Negro was shaking too hard to aim a gun for many a day to come, and Flint Trone had not as yet recovered his weapons.

"Yorbuss!" called one of the crooks, a gigantic hombre with a bush of red whiskers stubbling his jowls.

Receiving no answer, "Red-beard" stared at his fellows with indecision written on his brutal features.

"That's funny," grunted the outlaw. "Shuffles said he'd wait fer us up hyar after he got through hangin' them two Circle Chain boogers."

A Mexican rustler pointed toward the two ropes which dangled empty from the limb of the Gunman's Ghost Hangtree.

"Look like mebbe he bury gringos," suggested the Mexican. "Roan hoss of stranger here yet."

Red-beard peered about the camp ground, clawing his whiskers in perplexity.

"We cain't linger around hyar too long," he grunted. "Them Circle Chain waddies down thar by the remuda corral has prob'ly got dressed an' has cut out an' saddled some broncs by now. They'll light a shuck fer this camp first off, huntin' Trone."

A rawboned outlaw with straw-colored hair proceeded to climb astraddle his lather-soaked horse.

"We done our job tuh-night, stampedin' that herd," gruffed the blond crook. "I move we goes back tuh the Texicano. Shuffles is prob'ly thar, rustlin' up a crew tuh manage that herd with tuh-morrow."

The others nodded assent and began mounting.

For a moment Lon Cole remained

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against the shadowy box of the chuck wagon.

Then, hardly knowing why he did so, the youthful puncher eased his Colt .45s from holsters and thumbed back the hammers.

Without a word of warning to Flapjack or the Circle Chain boss, the waddy leaped out into the open, his jutting six-guns reflecting the dancing sparks from the wind-fanned camp fire.

"Hoist 'em, gents!"

As Cole's voice rang out like the clang of a firebell, the six riders jerked back reins and cranked their heads about to stare toward the chuck wagon.

"*Caramba!* Eet ees the young poker player!" cawed the Mexican in dismay. "He has got loose, señores!"

The red-bearded crook, who appeared to be boss of the six rustlers, looped reins about saddle horn and peered into the black bores of Cole's hoglegs for a full ten seconds before his arms began to grope upward.

"That's better!" snarled Cole, coming forward several paces. "The first one who reaches fer his cutters will git dumped from the saddle pronto, so keep 'em high!"

Six pairs of arms upraised, the outlaws cringed before the waddy's weaving gun muzzles.

Over his shoulder, Cole rasped out to the men hiding behind the chuck wagon:

"Flapjack an' Trone, git out thar an' relieve these gents o' their hardware. I'm thinkin' they'll talk when we herd 'em intuh the sheriff's *calabozo* an' let the law know how Yorbuss choused yore beef tuh-night!"

Even as Trone stepped into the open to carry out Cole's orders, the red-bearded giant chewed out an oath of defiance.

"Let 'em have it, *compadres!*" yelled the crook as his hairy paws blurred down to holsters. "They must 'a' kilt Yorbuss, an' we'll stretch hemp if——"

Br-rang! Cole's left-hand .45 bucked sharply in his fist, and Red-beard sagged in the saddle, a sickening gray color shooting across his face as he groped his fingers from gun butts to the crimson-spouting hole in his right side.

Then, as his mount bucked sharply before the echoing crash of the gun, Red-beard flopped from saddle and struck the ground heavily.

The horse reared back against the others, and in the moment of confusion the straw-haired rustler and the Mexican thought they saw their chance to throw guns on the cool-voiced young Texan by the chuck wagon.

Bang-bang! Two flicks of fire came from the muzzle of Cole's right-hand Colt, and the blond rider went limp with a bullet-crushed elbow.

Behind him the Mexican sagged across his Brazos saddle horn, his skull bored by Cole's second shot a split instant before the Mex could level his own Colts at the trail boss's figure.

"We give up!" yelled two of the remaining crooks in unison as they slid from the pitching saddles of their mounts. "Don't shoot, hombre!"

Red-beard's horse galloped away, and when the dust settled, Flint Trone was busily engaged in unbuckling the shell belts of the three outlaws who had leaped to the ground, hands in air. The blond outlaw, his shirt bearing a huge crimson spot, had to be helped from his horse.

"I reckon these buskies will talk plenty, boss!" rasped the man from

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Wyoming as he saw Flapjack tying up their prisoners with evident gusto. "An' now, I still got a little errand tuh run down in Palo Verde before it gits daylight. I——"

Again Cole was interrupted by the rumble of hoofs up the slope to eastward, but this time the sound brought no alarm. Into the range of light cast by the dying camp fire came upward to a dozen riders, most of them hatless, all showing signs of having been rudely roused from slumber and having saddled up in haste.

"What in blazes happened, boss?" yelled one beefy-shouldered waddy whose chaps bore the Chain Circle brand. "We was all snoozin' away when *bingo!*—all hades busts loose, an' now it looks like some skunks have stampeded our herd! I don't know——"

Flint Trone waved off the man's babbling discourse and jerked a thumb toward Lon Cole and his four dejected prisoners.

"It's too long a story tuh tell now, boys," panted the old stockman. "Yuh was right, Curly. Raiders jumped our herd tuh-night; raiders yuh see before yuh, here an' on the ground."

"But what in blazes——"

Trone put an arm over Lon Cole's shoulder as the waddy was busily engaged in ejecting fired shells from his Peacemakers and reloading from his belt ammunition.

"Boys, meet yore new trail boss, Lon Cole o' Wyomin' an' way p'ints," said the Circle Chain boss. "If it warn't fer him, I don't reckon you boys would 'a' been workin' fer me after tuh-night. He——"

Guns loaded, Lon Cole stepped forward, his blue eyes sweeping over the perspiring faces of Trone's crew. Each man was a well-muscled, tiger-lean Texas cowhand, and Cole knew that with their aid he would have a minimum of difficulty in seeing Trone's Herefords through to Longhorn City.

"Yuh heard Mr. Trone say he's hired me as yore foreman while we're on Tombstone Trail, boys," said Cole. "I'm sorry I cain't spare the time right now tuh shake yore hands an' git better acquainted, but fact is I got tuh start dishin' out orders plumb pronto, an' then leave yuh fer a spell.

"Boys, sometime around dawn a certain tinhorn down in Palo Verde will be sendin' a bunch o' gun hawks out on the prairie tuh corral them steers o' yourn. I want you fellers tuh be ready fer 'em, an' tuh feed 'em a good hot bullet reception."

He turned to Flint Trone with a grim smile.

"As I was sayin', I got a job tuh do in Palo Verde," he said. "If I do that job in time, yore boys won't have tuh worry about buckin' Yorbuss's snakes at sunrise. I'll be back tuh help round up them scattered steers by the time Flapjack has our breakfast coffee b'ilin'."

So saying, Lon Cole whistled for his strawberry roan, picked up the reins and swung into the saddle.

"Lon!" gasped out Flint Trone, anxiety making his tone high-pitched. "It's suicide fer you tuh go down tuh that Texicano Saloon an' buck Yorbuss single-handed! He's got a small army o' paid gun slammers backin' his booger plays!"

But Trone was talking to empty air. Down the western slope of the hill which was crowned by the Gunman's Ghost Hangtree, Lon Cole was riding to settle his first business as Trone's new herd boss of Tombstone Trail.

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CHAPTER IX.

SALOON PAY-OFF.

LON COLE entered Palo Verde by a side street which long residence in the cow town had made familiar to him in spite of the darkness that was the herald of approaching dawn. He dismounted alongside an adobe-walled shack which housed the Sagebrush County jail and sheriff's office.

Seeing a lamp gleaming inside, the waddy knocked at a side door. It was opened by a white-mustached old codger whom Cole recognized as a boyhood friend, Sheriff Si Appleby.

"Lon Cole!" gasped the sheriff as Cole stood in the lamplight, his thumbs hooked near gun butts. "Blast yuh, Lon, I got a warrant fer yore arrest. Yorbuss swears you shot his ear off an' vamosed with a poker pot that was his, an' thar's nothin' I kin do but hold yuh fer trial an'——"

Cole reached out to check the sheriff's hand as it reached for a pair of handcuffs.

"Hold on a minute, Si. You've known me since I was a slick-eared maverick—an' I reckon yuh know what kind o' riffraff hangs around the Texicano Saloon enough tuh know that Yorbuss ain't my kind o' stripe."

"I know, son. But he swore out a warrant tuh——"

Cole grabbed the bony old sheriff's arm and pulled him out into the street. Without giving Appleby a chance to interrupt, the waddy sketched briefly how he had seen Shuffles Yorbuss cheat Flint Trone out of his beef herd, how he had recovered the bill of sale, and the subsequent events up at the Gunman's Ghost Hangtree.

"Right this minute, Yorbuss is over at the Texicano tryin' tuh hire a trail crew tuh run them Circle Chain steers up the Trail, Si," concluded Lon Cole. "I come by tuh tell yuh that I'm goin' intuh the Texicano tuh call Yorbuss's bluff. If I don't come out o' thar in one piece, I want you tuh see that Trone keeps his herd."

With these words, Lon Cole turned and headed for the main street and the Texicano Saloon, disregarding the sheriff's cries for him to wait.

Unable to follow the waddy because he was in his sock feet, Sheriff Si Appleby scurried back into his office and began tussling with his high-heeled boots.

His face as grim as a storm cloud, Lon Cole crossed the wheel-rutted street of the town, his eyes sweeping right and left. A dance hall and two or three saloons still had lights in their windows, despite the fact the hands of the courthouse clock pointed to three forty-five a. m. These were the joints which kept Sheriff Si Appleby up to all hours during the trail-drive season.

Cole made his way up the steps of the wooden-awninged porch of the Texicano Saloon and through the batwing doors of the barroom.

As he had expected, Shuffles Yorbuss was busy exhorting the crowd of half-drunk, sombreroed riffraff who had spent the entire night guzzling whisky and playing cards in the Texicano.

"I tell yuh, I'm payin' top-hand wages tuh you wallopers, if yuh'll sign up with me tuh run that beef herd I won at poker tuh-night!" Yorbuss was bellowing as Cole stepped inside and stood with his back to the wall. "So far I only got half enough men signed up, an' they'll have tuh sober up afore they kin twirl a rope or cinch a kak. I——"

Yorbuss broke off, his bandaged

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head swiveling about as he caught sight of the stony-faced young cowpuncher who was pushing his way across the crowded barroom floor toward the bar where Yorbuss stood on a chair talking to the crowd.

"Cole!" gasped the tinhorn card sharp, his eyes bulging in their sockets. "You——"

Cole halted a dozen feet from Yorbuss, his legs widespread.

"I believe I heard you tellin' these buskies somethin' about a beef herd you won in a poker game, Shuffles!" rasped Lon Cole in a voice like the knell of doom. "Yuh neglected tuh mention that yuh *lost* said bill o' sale in a later poker game. I've come tuh collect that paper an' tuh——"

Face purple with hate, Shuffles Yorbuss flicked his arms in a quick, jerky motion which exposed the snouts of two vicious little .44 sleeve guns.

Br-r-r-rang! Before Yorbuss's fingers could flex on the triggers of the deadly hide-out weapons, the guns in Lon Cole's swivel holsters bellowed to the thunder of double .45s.

This time Cole did not aim for the gambler's ears. The top of his skull split open by driving lead, Yorbuss slammed back against the chair, upsetting it to topple his corpse to the sawdust-littered floor by the brass rail.

While the saloon crowd stared in amazement, Lon Cole stooped over the gambler's sprawled form, lifted a wallet from under Yorbuss's lapel, and recovered Flint Trone's bill of sale for a second time that night with gun smoke in his nostrils.

As he turned to face the battery of hostile eyes, Cole saw the raw-boned figure of Sheriff Appleby standing in the batwing doors, his six-guns weaving like snakes' heads over the crowd.

"Any hombres who figger tuh revenge Yorbuss's killin' had better keep their dewclaws offn their smoke poles!" bellowed the sheriff as Lon Cole drew both his smoking Colts and headed for the door. "Lon, the sun is just risin'. You'll jest about have time tuh git over the hill an' help Flint Trone round up them scattered steers before breakfast!"

Lon Cole is a pal plenty wuth havin', an' it's a shore thing we're all goin' tuh be glad we parded up with 'im. That's why he's comin' back next week in another thunderin' yarn that yuh'll never fergive yoreself if yuh don't read. Be shore tuh git yore copy o' Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly next week.

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Death at the Badger's Hide-out

By J. Allan Dunn
Author of "Death Calls A Ranger," etc.

THE ravine ran deep into the flank of the sierra like a ragged wound. Halfway up its sides grew thick brush, dried by the heat of the long summer. Above, the walls were steep and sheer, as unscalable as the battlements of a fortress. The bottom of the gorge was choked with dwarf oak and mesquite and the undergrowth was heavy.

The only track was a well-worn deer path, that looked as if it might lead to a deerlick. Now it held other sign, the hoofprints of hard-ridden horses, the sign of El Tejón —the Badger—and his desperadoes.

Bud Jones of Company F, Texas Rangers, followed the still warm trail that led from the stagecoach El Tejón had held up, killing the express messenger and one passenger who tried to save his money.

Bud figured he was not more than two hours behind them, three at the most. On his big roan, Pepper, he had made good time. Together,

The Chamber o' Ghosts is full o' dead hombres, an' Bud Jones is about to join 'em.

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they presented a forceful picture of justice, hastening to avenge wrongdoing.

Bud, like most Rangers, was in his teens, but though his face was smooth and beardless, unmarked by any lines save the wrinkles at the corners of his keen, blue-gray eyes, none would doubt his authority and efficiency. His skin was tanned as dark as that of a Comanche, his jaw was firmly set, and he rode the big roan as though he were part of it.

On Bud's chest was the silver star of the Rangers, about his lean waist he wore cartridge belts for his six-gun and the carbine in its saddle sheath under his left thigh. The holster of the .45 on his right hip was offset by the long-bladed bowie knife sheathed on his left.

Rangers had no uniform save these requisites. Bud wore the clothes of an everyday cow-puncher. Pepper was a heavier, bigger, faster mount than any cow horse, and the roan was well grained and groomed.

The air was still. Cicadas whirred in Robador Canyon (Robber Gorge). Through it El Tejón and his bandits had bolted like badgers. They were wanted for this and other crimes, dead or alive.

Pepper snorted. His sensitive nostrils caught a taint he did not like, apart from the musky smell of the rattlers coiled on the high ledges.

It was the smell of a wood fire. Bud checked the roan, and the ominous scent came to him also. He set a hand on the cantle of his saddle and looked back. He saw faint brown clouds rising like a light fog. It swiftly mounted and thickened. From it came a sinister crackle, then a ruddy, pulsing glow.

He was trapped. The crafty El Tejón had left one or more men behind, in case of pursuit. They had hidden and watched the Ranger as he entered the ravine, following the plain sign of their getaway. Then they had fired the brush.

The blaze increased with fierce rapidity, devouring the crisp fuel. It created its own draft, and the canyon was a natural chimney.

There had to be a way out somewhere, Bud told himself. The tracks did not return, nor did they swerve aside. The exit might be a secret one. The ravine was gradually closing in; he could see where it forked.

If he took the wrong fork he was lost. Even if he chose the right one and found it led to a slow, steep climb, the flames might overtake him long before he reached safety. He had no thought of abandoning Pepper, his tried and true comrade. They had faced peril and adventure, success and danger together, and they would meet disaster, if it came.

"Looks like we was in a tough spot, old-timer," said Bud. The roan stayed motionless save for the twitching ears that listened to the crackling of the fire, shifting into a steady roar. Points of flame were whirled ahead. The glow looked like that of a blast furnace, filling the jagged V of the notch.

As the heat increased, Bud shifted in his saddle, looking to the fork. There the rock seemed bare of vegetation. He calculated his chances. They were few, and slim.

He decided there was but one chance left, as he figured the speed of the oncoming fire. It rushed onward like some frightful dragon pursuing its helpless prey, snorting deadly fumes, suffocating and blinding, sending forth blasting, searing breath.

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From out of the fire sounded a crackling and snapping, accompanied by bursts and gusts of ignited gas. The reek of resinous saps rose, of blistering laurel, crisping—as he and Pepper would crisp and curl, if they did not reach safety, to shapeless heaps of calcined flesh and bones and hide.

Any hope of hitting the right fork, of finding continued sign, of being able to get above the fire in time, was too faint to count on.

An emergency like this called for more than the mighty courage possessed both by horse and master. Brains were needed, too.

The men who had fired the brush would not have waited to see what happened, once their fiendish job was well started. It would be useless. They could not see through the veil of smoke. No doubt they were certain that the hated Ranger could not find the way out, and they had made a detour to rejoin the Badger in his hide-out.

It suddenly struck Bud that the heading on the reward bills, posted for the capture of El Tejón and his gang, might be read with two meanings.

El Tejón had often boasted of what he would do to any Ranger who fell into his clutches. He would welcome one dead or alive, provided the Ranger was in his power. It looked as if he would get one dead, or the remains of one.

He was probably gloating over that certainty right now, watching the ever-spreading pall of smoke that might be the Ranger's only shroud.

It was not often that Bud spurred Pepper, but now he pricked him with the rowels of his Spanish *espuelas*. The roan went galloping ahead at top speed along the narrow deer trail over which the bandits had ridden fast in single file.

He hoped for a little luck, for a break to aid him work out his final resource, and he breathed a sigh of relief when he found it.

It was not very large. Only a small open space, swampy from a spring that formed a little reedy pool.

Sliding swiftly from his saddle, he took his bandanna and soaked it. From his soogan roll he took another, and a sash which he sometimes used to disguise himself as a Mexican. He sopped these also. One bandanna he tied loosely about Pepper's nostrils, the other over his own nose and mouth. He didn't use the sash. Later, he might have to blindfold the roan.

Fire was the animal's natural and most dreaded enemy, offset by confidence in its friend and owner. The roan stood quite still, understanding, watching while Bud slashed dry brush with his bowie knife, piled it in four places beyond the little swamp and set fire to it. The brush piles ignited rapidly, began to create their own draft, and forged ahead.

Now the Ranger was between two fires, one of his own making. If the other caught him before his cleared a way, this was the end. There was little to do but wait.

Behind him, the conflagration gathered strength and speed. It would burn itself out in time, would hardly spread beyond the ravine. It would not fire the mountain forest unless some random ball of flame leaped over the rocky parapets.

In his roll there was a dressed hide. It had a hole in its center, and he used it now and then as a poncho when he played Mexie. At other times it served for bedding or blanket.

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Now he sacrificed it to make rough boots for Pepper, who would have to travel over freshly burned, scorching ground and roots. He soaked the pieces and tied them about the roan's fetlocks with whang strings. Meantime he was noting the race between his own minor blaze and the one that already made it hard to breathe, beat upon them, scorching hide and clothing and rigging.

A blister broke out on Bud's neck. A flake of flame lit on the crown of his Stetson, and he beat it out, keeping his sombrero in his hand. He might need it later as a flail to use in the fiery gantlet he would have to pass. His blaze was making a fairly wide swath, but as the gorge narrowed, and its V deepened, any gap it made would be slight.

They could bear it no longer. The fierce heat was parching their throats, taking all the moisture from their bodies, their lungs, eating up their strength. The smoke drifted ahead of them, starred with sparks that died out only where Bud's counterfire had destroyed the fuel.

It was time to go—if there still *was* time. Eyes smarted and ran, in man and beast. Soon they would not be able to see.

Bud had charged a horde of yelling Yaquis, with his comrades had ridden against desperate, cornered outlaws, shooting to save their necks from the noose.

All that was nothing compared to this. Fire raced up behind, gaining despite Pepper's desperate bounds. They left it behind at last, halted by the swampy gap, at the edge of which the flames raged like a baffled pack of hungry brutes.

But the fire began to creep up on both flanks, hurrying to join the blaze ahead, a relentless enemy that knew no fear, that would never retreat until it died for lack of sustenance.

Pepper bounded on, breathing with snorts through the bandanna that was long since dry, like the one Bud wore. He headed straight for the inferno Bud had created. Unless it burned itself out——

Through the smoke, the tall wedge of cliff between the forks loomed up. Flames, like the spray of waves about its base, were licking at it. That would not last long, but there was still a belt of fire to be passed, hissing and spitting. And on each side the flames leaped on to join it and make it impassable.

Pepper did not falter, did not despair, but held on into the open jaws of death. Bud rode low in the saddle; both horse and master were stung and bitten, tortured.

The Ranger saw that the smoke ahead was lessening, lowering, turning from brown to gray.

"We'll make it yet, *caballo*," he muttered beneath his bandanna.

Pepper heard him, or sensed him. With gallant head flung high, he surged through the flames ahead, his boots burned off, the horn on his hoofs singed, his tender frogs automatically flinching as the burning stubs stabbed them.

Leap after desperate leap and they were through. The right-hand fork was clear and they went clattering over the loose boulders of a long-dried torrent bed, which carried water only in the rains.

Bud wished that a stream flowed there now. But they were safe; the fire could not reach them now. It was not water both of them needed, so much as grease to salve their blisters.

Bud always carried a can of Rangers' Balm with him, made from the balsams of herbs and tree saps, blended with bears' grease.

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Pepper stumbled on the tatters of a makeshift boot, and Bud reined him in. The proud roan hung its head, winded, almost played out.

As the Ranger dismounted, his seared flesh made him wince. His charred clothing fell away.

On his left he saw the mouth of a cavern. He led the roan into its coolness. As he bent to examine Pepper's legs, his bloodshot eyeballs revealed something that made him start and stand tense.

The cave dripped water from its sides. Limestone stalactites hung from the roof. Its floor was sandy —and in the sand he saw the sign of hoofs.

II.

Bud recognized some of the prints. He had followed them on the trail he had picked up at the scene of the stage robbery. Word had come to the Rangers' headquarters that El Tejón was in the neighborhood, and planning the holdup.

The informer, a half-breed, more Indian than Mexican, hoped to get the reward, or a part of it, offered for the capture and conviction of El Tejón, the Badger. The outlaw leader was set down under both of these names in the Rangers' privately printed and circulated book, "List of Fugitives from Justice."

Bud, just in from patrol, had been sent off solo by his commander, Captain Halstead. They could not know for certain how many were in the Badger's band. That didn't matter. There were only thirty-four men in the Rangers' troop, covering a vast territory. Each Ranger had to be ready to meet any and all emergencies, to ride all day and often most of the night. One Ranger was worth a dozen bandits any day, Halstead asserted. And his men did their best to live up to it.

They did not know at the camp that the stage schedule had been advanced. But the Badger knew. Therefore, when Bud arrived at the ford which he had figured as the most likely place for the robbery, he found it all over. The dead express messenger and the rash passenger lay under tarpaulins. The traces had been cut, the six stage horses stampeded. The passengers, some angry, some still scared, were waiting for the driver to catch one of the horses and ride it back to the nearest town twelve miles away to report.

Ranger headquarters would have been nearer, but the driver didn't seem to have thought of that, and perhaps he did not know just where to find the camp. He was intent upon getting a team together, to repair his harness and get the mail through, or what was left of it.

The arrival of a Ranger seemed like a miracle to the stranded passengers. It was not easy to make them see that he had to get away while the scent was fairly fresh.

No especial care had been taken to hide their trail after their first move, which was to ignore the ford and ride upstream in the creek. Bud found where they came out, seeing there, in damp soil, the same hoofprint he looked at now. The print was that of a horse, but it was unusually long and narrow, almost like a mule's. Two nails were missing in one shoe, one in another. There were other prints, but this stood out and now he had trailed it to the cave.

Bud knew the robber was the Badger, not merely because of the tip, but because the description given by the passengers tallied with that in the book. The bandit was

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a stunted, thickset man, apparently of great strength, and although his limbs were short, of much agility. He had eyes like those of an animal, a coarse beard of brown sprinkled with gray, with hair to match, so far as it showed beneath his steeple-crowned sombrero, and a long nose and cruel mouth.

It was he who had shot down the express messenger before he rode out of cover with his men and ordered the passengers to line up. It was he again who had shot and killed the passenger who tried to hide his wallet in his boot. And the Badger and his bandit crew were now, Bud was positive, not far away.

It was fairly light in the cave. There was a natural tunnel, and some distance down it, daylight sifted down through a natural opening where the roof had fallen in. All down this passage the Ranger could make out the pendent stalks of white limestone formed from water drips saturated with the mineral.

He decided against taking in Pepper. No matter how gently the roan might try to go, its hoofs would send ringing echoes down the tunnel. Bud himself could move as silently as a Comanche, and he had no hesitation about going in. The sight of the two dead men, still and stark under the tarpaulins, was still with him. The thought of the wanton killing of the messenger enraged him.

The Badger was going to be taken, was going to be hanged. Bud's own narrow escape from the devilish plan of El Tejón to burn him and Pepper alive did not rouse him as much as the other murders. He wanted the Badger alive, to make an example of him, to show that justice was being done.

He led the roan out of the vaulted cavern, sought for and found a shaded rift where he smeared Pepper's burns, and some of his own, with the healing ointment. He left his saddle gun in its sheath, loosed the cinch, washed out the roan's mouth with tepid water from his canteen, and gargled some himself. Then, spinning the cylinder of his .45 Colt, he went back to the cave again.

Bud wore moccasins, with low heels, rather than the boots most of his comrades preferred. He liked them for all kinds of trailing. They were easier for walking, and in them he was noiseless. He had left his spurs behind with the roan, and he glided like a ghost along the passage, careful not to touch some brittle formation that would fall, he knew, with a resounding crash.

As he went, he vaguely sensed other mysterious corridors branching off, with here and there natural chambers on either side. He passed masses of limestone drip shaped like fans, like organ pipes, pulpits, and statues.

Coming to the spot where the roof had fallen, he stopped to listen before he swiftly crossed it to where the main tunnel continued. Here again he saw the prints of horses' hoofs, among them the ones he had especially noticed. Far off, he thought he caught the sound of voices, of laughter.

The bandits would be in good humor while dividing their loot. He did not think they knew anything about the fire. When the men they had left behind came in with their news, there would be greater rejoicing over an enemy killed, over a trail hidden by ashes. The brush would soon grow again.

It was clear to Bud that there was another way into this hide-out.

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The Badger was too smart to choose a burrow that could be stopped up at one end, without there being another entrance by which way the men who had fired the brush would come.

It was cool in the tunnel, damp with the steady trickle of water. Bud forgot his burns. The tunnel twisted, and he saw sunlight and a glint of green. The voices and laughter were louder now. He could hear them jesting in Spanish, which he understood as well as English. His face grew grim in the gloom as he caught the meaning of their coarse jokes about the messenger and the slain passenger.

Now he moved more cautiously. There was a deep crack in the floor of the tunnel, a gulf almost twenty feet across, with the sound of flowing water in its depths. Across this, a wooden bridge had been built, stout enough to hold mounted or laden horses. It had a hand rail on each side. It was stoutly made, and did not creak as the Ranger started across it.

Just before he reached the end, he had a sudden hunch. He felt a plank move under his foot, and he started to leap off the bridge.

The Badger's cunning had not failed him. He had set a trap to catch the unwary, those who did not know the trick of the bridge.

Bud's weight had released the trigger that had been set. It tripped, and released a suspended bulk of rock that the Ranger's spring was not enough to avoid. It struck with tremendous weight and force upon his shoulders, sent him sprawling with a blow on the back of his head that stunned him.

For a second he saw streaks of light that soon vanished in oblivion and unconsciousness.

III.

Bud came to, lying on his back, looking up at the sky. His skull seeming to open and shut as he opened his eyes and forced them to take in his surroundings. His will fought against the pain, and conquered it.

He had been stripped of everything except his short drawers. The sun beat on his unprotected skin that was marked with scalds and sears of the furnace through which he had passed. He was utterly defenseless, and tightly bound hand and foot.

This was a hidden glen, a secret pocket of the sierra, a basin set between tall cliffs. Lying there on grass, he could see trees; the shadow of a flying bird crossed his face. It was a buzzard, cruising the air for the meal Bud's own flesh might furnish before long. Its mate swung above it in great circles, wings set, gliding on the currents. There would be others who would swiftly gather to the feast.

"His eyes are open; he is conscious," said a gloating voice in Spanish.

Men made a ring about him. Mexies, all of them, he believed. Five, besides the Badger, easily recognized, his fierce eyes gleaming, his teeth showing in his beard.

The Badger kicked his naked ribs, spat at him.

"So," he said in broken English, "you are a lucky man so far, gringo. You escape the fire, the rock does not keel you, *Rangero maldito* that you are! You come to catch El Tejón, but he ees too smart for you."

The men who had started the blaze must have come in. There were six in the band, all more or less drunk, their faces coarse and

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vicious as they exulted over their victim. They were all armed. One of them had on Bud's belt and six-gun; another had his bowie knife. The Badger wore two guns, and two or three seemed to have only knives.

They were dressed in charro clothing, gaudy but stained with grease and dirt, the bullion lace of their *jaquetas* and the saucer rims of their sombreros tarnished. They were not the sort who cleaned either their bodies or their garments.

Bud lifted his head, and a stab of agony shot through it. There was a serape spread on a flat rock, with dice and their loot on it. This was composed of bills, gold and silver coins, jewelry, and registered mail torn open.

They had divided this loot and had been gambling before the springing of the trap told them they had a greater diversion, the baiting and killing of a Ranger. To them there could be no finer sport. Bud read it in their faces, in their eyes, and in their swift gabble of Spanish which he would not let them know he understood.

Not that it mattered much. The end would not be delayed longer than he could retain life under their torture. The eyes of some of them shifted as they met his resolute gaze, charged with courage and contempt.

"Where I have come, other Rangers will follow," he said.

The Badger laughed. His eyes were fixed with the lust of brutal cruelty. He kicked Bud again.

"There are many theengs I could do weeth you, *Rangero*," he said. "There are many ways in wheech to amuse us. We could flay you alive, and send the hide stuffed with dry grass to your camp. There are ants. Or a rattler, tied with a rawhide leash, that weel stretch when the dew comes. But there ees a much better way."

Bud watched the man who had his six-gun. If he could only grip that, despite the odds. They were all cowards, even El Tejón, when they were faced by a real man. Braggarts and bullies, all of them, the marrow in their spines was as yellow as locust juice.

"We shall preserve you," El Tejón went on, his voice surcharged with malice at the Ranger's calm. "Thees place was once where leeved an ancient Indio tribe, long ago. Their bravos are buried here. But their chiefs—also, I theenk, the chiefs they keeled—are all een La Camarra de los Espectros. I theenk we weel place *you* there, not because we theenk you a chief, but because we weel put you there alive, an' watch you turn to *un espectro*, verree slowly."

"Camarra de los Espectros," meant "Ghost Chamber." Bud could not determine what they meant by it, but he could hardly repress a shudder. They all appreciated El Tejón's joke, there was no doubt about that.

"Then, when your *compañeros* come, eef they ever do, they weel find me and my amigos gone to Mexico, to spend thees loot we take from the stage. Across the Rio Grande, no Rangers dare to come. But they weel find you verree well preserved, señor."

He spoke to his men, ordering them to pick Bud up. They bore him back into the tunnel, across the bridge, handling him like a bale of goods, bumping him carelessly.

Two carried lanterns. El Tejón bore another. They carted him into one of the side caverns, set him down with his back leaning against its rough side.

Bud could hardly believe his eyes.

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He seemed to be in a nightmare, but his brain told him it was real.

This was the Chamber of the Ghosts. They stood in a ghastly array, some of the forms so shrouded that they could barely be made out as having once been men. Others were plainer.

This was the burial place of ancient chiefs, where all would be preserved until the cavern crumbled. All were naked, save for breech clouts, barely visible.

These were statues—not carved but human. The corpses had been bound to limestone pillars, and the steady drip of lime-saturated water had petrified them, turned them to images of stone, resisting decay like the logs in the petrified forest of the Grand Canyon in Arizona.

Respect had been paid to these chiefs, friends or foes. Bud was to join their ghostly company, not in respect but in revenge.

"They say," said El Tejón, "that the leetle, steady dreep of water on the head sends a man mad. I hope you weel not go mad too soon, señor, but know that you are slowly, verree slowly, being turned into stone. So, tie heem to thees pillar that grows slowly, like a tree. Een time, the ropes weel rot, and your flesh weel shreenk, but *you* weel be nicely preserve. You sabe, gringo?"

The last words were fiendish in their glee, tempered by Bud's steady disregard of the outlaw. If he had to die in this way, he would give them no satisfaction.

They tied him to a pillar shaped like an elongated hourglass, down which the petrifying water ran slowly but steadily. They left him there, taking their lanterns with them, leaving him in the darkness with the petrified dead, whose company he would slowly join.

He heard the stealthy drip of the water. He felt it crawling over his body, tapping on his skull. It was better, he told himself, than buzzards tearing at his vitals. But the carrion birds would not attack until he was dead. And he was alive—terribly alive. His flesh crept. He was growing numb. The tapping on his skull seemed to beat on his soul.

"You're Bud Jones, Texas Ranger," he told himself. "You're not licked yet, not yet."

The dripping water seemed to mock him. "But soon, but soon," it seemed to say, "very soon! A day or so, and you will be cased with a film of stone."

But the cold water eased the ache in his brain, allowing him to summon his reason. *There must be a way out!*

And then the hope came to him, grew and warmed him. The chiefs—the *espectros*—all about him, had been dead when they were bound to the pillars. They had no strength in them, but he was alive.

El Tejón and his men had accepted them as fixtures, they had not thought, or known, that such columns were not solid stone, like granite, but only crystalized formations—brittle.

It took, as he thought, hours of deliberately concentrated effort, straining his muscles, flinging his weight against the pillar with its slender center, before he heard it snap. He fell upon his face.

His bonds, enlarged to grasp the formation, relaxed. He was chilled to the bone, but he managed to free himself, chafing his limbs.

He was sitting up when he saw the light of a lantern showing as it came down the tunnel, approaching the Ghost Chamber. The bearer

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stumbled a little, singing as he came. It was the Badger, come to see how his victim bore up against the gradual, living death, to which he had doomed the Ranger.

IV.

El Tejón wore two guns. The thought of that warmed the Ranger. He stood, suddenly charged with vitality.

The light showed plainer. He heard and translated the words of the song—an outlaw ballad:

> The sight of a dead friend, alas,
> It makes you sad.
> But the sight of a dead foe, ha-ha-ha!
> That is a sight that makes you glad.
> And, if you have killed him,
> If you have stilled him,
> Why then——

The verse ended in a hiccup.

Bud reached up and broke off a piece of limestone. It made a lance some four feet long. The end was blunted but it was a weapon, a poor match against two guns, still a weapon.

El Tejón reeled into the chamber, holding his lantern high.

"Gringo—how do you like my joke? Where are you?"

He looked about him stupidly at first, then swiftly sobering, snatching out both guns, searching for Bud.

Bud flung his lance. It struck El Tejón on his chest, and sent him staggering, fell to the floor and shattered.

El Tejón's guns roared as the Ranger leaped for him. The bullets brought down a shower of small stalactites. It made one of the ghostly statues totter on its base and fall. El Tejón had set down his lantern. By its light, Bud leaped the obstacle, as a bullet struck him in the shoulder.

He surged against the shock of it, diving low for El Tejón's knees, grasping them, bringing him down as the Badger fired his second gun, and the chamber of death rang with the discharge.

Bud grappled with the Badger, who fought tooth and nail, with clubbing, shooting guns.

Strength was welling out of Bud, but it was also mounting within him. He got astride of the Badger, grabbed one wrist, and ground the small bones until El Tejón, cursing, dropped that gun.

Then the Ranger slugged him savagely by the flickering light of the lantern, which lay on its side. He felt and heard, the bone of his knuckles connect with El Tejón's jaw, felt the outlaw grow limp between his vising knees about the bandit's chest.

Bud Jones rose, righted the lantern. He belted the Badger's cartridge belt about his own naked loins.

He was his own man again, a Texas Ranger!

The cavern held no sound now but the drip of water. He took the rawhide strips that had bound him, and secured the Badger. If he had been El Tejón, he would have made sure of his foe by killing him. But that was not the Rangers' way of doing things.

It was dark when he stepped out of the tunnel to the glen, treading gingerly across the bridge. He figured El Tejón would not have bothered to set the trigger, and he was correct.

Now he had a gun in each hand, reloaded to the limit. The fire burned low. Five drunken bandits slumbered there.

A moon had risen. By its light they stared up stupidly at the

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Ranger, who was almost nude, one shoulder dark with a crimson flow that Bud ignored. It could be attended to later.

"Lie as you are, you coyotes," he ordered them. "Git up one at a time like I tell you."

He changed into rapid-fire Spanish, but they had understood. Under the menace of his guns they obeyed him like sheep.

The sweat oozed out of them. Only one of them made a move to crouch and pull a gun. He had barely touched the butt when he rolled over, yelping like a kicked cur, both bones of his forearm shattered.

"You've got my gun," said Bud coldly. "I'm the only one can handle that. I'd shoot all of you and leave you for the buzzards if I didn't want to see you swing. I can use *you*," he told the nearest. "You'll tie them up, like I've got your chief tied. If you know what you're doin', you won't make a false move, or I'll give you my idea of a 'good joke.'"

The fear of death was on them. They knew they would have to swing, but each moment of life was precious. This man who towered over them, triumphant, a gun in each hand, the more victorious in a way because of the crimson stain on his body, gripped their puny souls and squeezed them to subjection.

The dawn showed pale, flushed to pink, as Bud Jones herded El Tejón's band from the cavern. They were all snugly bound, including the Badger, in their own saddles.

Bud had attended to his own wound. He was dressed in his own clothes once more. The silver star of office shone on his chest.

Pepper nickered at him as Bud tightened the cinch, regarding his captives. He was going to herd them down the ravine where the fire had died out in the night.

The Badger, his ankles tied beneath the belly of his mount, his wrists fastened to the horn, scowled in the morning light.

Bud looked them over. He knew they understood English well enough.

"You're licked," he told them. "The yeller is oozin' out of your spines. There ain't courage enough in the hull bunch of you to furnish a hawned toad."

There was not a comeback among them as he herded them down the burned-out ravine. Only the Badger chewed his lips until his beard was stained red, and the white hairs no longer showed.

Bud's shore got a right tuh yell at the bandits about courage, considerin' how much he's got. But then, a Ranger's shore got tuh have plenty o' bravery, especially when he runs up agin' the kind of outlaws he's goin' tuh buck soon. Watch fer the next story about Bud Jones; it'll be comin' up soon in Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly.

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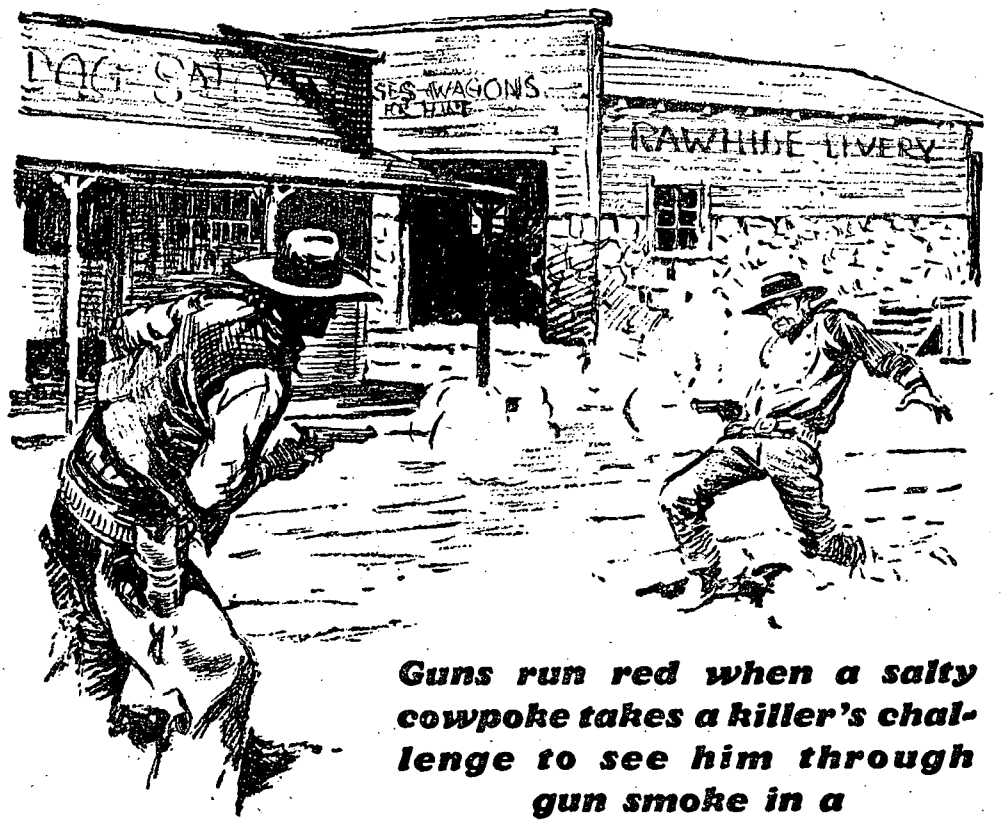

Guns run red when a salty cowpoke takes a killer's challenge to see him through gun smoke in a

High-noon Show-down

By Chuck Martin

Author of "Hobbled Stirrups," etc.

ROUND-UP pay was jingling in the pockets of "Smilin'" Carson's chaps as he came riding into Rawhide on his top horse. The wide grin on his tanned face showed where he got his name. Everything about him told the story of a cowboy coming to town.

He backed his horse away from the tie rail in front of the Red Dog Saloon when the swinging doors burst open under the impact of a hurtling body. The smile froze on his face when he recognized "Sober Sandy" Sawtelle, owner and ramrod of the 3 S outfit. The little old cattleman collapsed like a limp red rag under the whittled hitch rack.

A tall, wide-shoudlered hombre split the doors again, with a gun at full cock in his big freckled fist. He braked his high heels to stop his rush even while he was lining his sights on the prostrate man. Savage killer

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light glowed in his squinty yellow eyes, and then the lightning struck him.

Smilin' Carson spread his arms wide and left his saddle like a bulldogger taking his steer. "Squint" Barlow went down under that driving plunge, and the gun exploded in his hand and clattered against the saloon front. The slender cowboy followed through and nudged viciously with his right shoulder. When he rolled to his feet there were two men sleeping dreamlessly.

He stiffened and turned slowly when a gun muzzle jabbed against his back and was withdrawn immediately. A little man with a trimmed black beard was staring at him from behind the six-gun, and Carson caught his breath when he recognized "Van Dyke" Thompson. Just an inch over five feet tall, Thompson was the deadliest gun fighter in west Texas.

"You bought chips in a closed game, yearlin'," Thompson said quietly. "You packin' a hide-out?"

Carson was still smiling coldly with the corners of his mouth. "No gun," he answered slowly. "But I can get one!"

"Get it and come smokin'," said Thompson murmuring softly. "Straight up twelve o'clock is when I wipe that grin off yore face!"

"I'm takin' first dibbies on that buckaroo," a voice rasped hoarsely, and Squint Barlow climbed to his feet just as Carson quartered to face him.

Smilin' Carson was just over medium height in a country of tall men. His lean frame carried a hundred and forty pounds, but every bit of it was whalebone and rawhide. Barlow would crowd the scales at a hundred and eighty, and saddle work does not make fat. He dug in with his heels and came on with a rush that carried him into the rail when Carson side-stepped like a spooky horse.

The lean cowboy braced on one heel and put all his weight behind the right fist that started from his hip. The blow clipped Squint Barlow behind the left ear and turned him squarely. Smilin' Carson stepped in behind another punch just as Barlow finished his turn, and his knuckles thudded solidly against the outthrust jaw like a bullwhip on a sandbag.

Squint Barlow hung poised like a mountain pine that has been struck by lightning. Then he pitched face forward to the ground without moving his big boots. His body rocked a time or two and then settled to rest, and Smilin' Carson turned slowly when a small hand touched his shoulder.

"Straight up twelve," a husky voice reminded softly. "I'll see you —through smoke!"

Van Dyke Thompson was standing with boots spaced wide, and both little hands hooked in his studded gun belt. His keen gray eyes were fastened to Carson's face, and the cowboy was still smiling. Only now the grin was a bit crooked when Carson nodded his tousled head.

"Tally," Smilin' Carson said softly. "High-noon show-down!"

He turned his back without another word and found Sober Sandy leaning against the rail. The old cattleman pulled himself up to the saddle when Carson reached for his trailing reins, and the two rode down the dusty street, going-away from Rawhide.

Sober Sandy Sawtelle never touched liquor in any form, and every hand on the 3 S spread knew it. He was smaller than Smilin' Carson and ten pounds lighter, but his jaw was set like a shoulder of granite

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when he turned his battered face and spoke to the young buckaroo.

"I'm takin' up that smoke challenge, Smilin'. It was all my ruckus, and I'll handle my own grief!"

"Nothin' doin'!" the cowboy laughed. "Thompson passed it along to me personal, and the onliest reason I'm foggin' out to the bunk house is to get my hogleg. You mind telling a hand what you was doing in the Red Dog Saloon?"

"I was paying off the round-up hands," the old cattleman snapped. "Squint Barlow told me to have a drink, and you saw what happened when I turned him down!"

"He was fixin' to gun you when I lit down on him all spread out," the cowboy explained. "But where did Van Dyke Thompson figger in the play?"

"Him and Squint is pards, and he was eggin' Squint on," Sawtelle growled. "He's a cold killer, Smilin'. And up to now he ain't never shot second!"

"There always has to be a first time," the cowboy grunted. "He don't make as big a target as some, but I passed him my spoken word!"

Old Sober Sandy glared from his one good eye and began to talk to himself. Smilin' Carson continued to smile, but he spurred his roan into a high lope.

"I'll take the big un," he heard Sawtelle mutter. "He drew gun on me, the killin' skunk!"

Then he kicked his horse into a run to keep up with Carson, and an hour later the two roared into the 3 S yard and stopped at the horse corral. Both stripped the riding gear from their sweating horses and roped out fresh mounts. Sober Sandy was sixty years old, but he stepped along like a kid when he high-heeled to the big adobe house.

His face was grim when he reached for his worn gun belt hanging on a deerhorn. He buckled it around his lean lips and fastened the tie-down low on his skinny thigh. Then he slipped the old six-gun several times and jerked his head up when a horse thundered into the yard and slid to a stop in front of the broad gallery.

The old cattleman caught his battered hat with his left hand and pulled it low over his bushy eyebrows. Walking stiff-legged like a banty rooster on the prod, he stamped out on the big porch just as Squint Barlow lit down and hitched the horse with trailing reins.

II.

Sober Sandy spread his boots and settled for balance. His thin face was covered with dried blood from the beating he had taken, and now he was watching the big rocky hands of the bully who had manhandled him. Squint Barlow was crouching toward him, with barn shoulders hunched to shadow his gun. He was growling like a killer wolf, his lips skinned back to show broken teeth in the corners of his ugly mouth.

"I finish what I start, you runty old wart hog!" he growled deep in his corded throat. "And I knew you'd get yoreself heeled!"

Sober Sandy didn't answer—just reached down slowly with his clawed right hand and tapped the grip of his old Peacemaker. He cocked his white head to one side, and his gray eyes narrowed and watched the big hands of Squint Barlow.

"That cowboy of yores won't have a chance agin' Van Dyke," Barlow sneered. "Start reachin', you spavined old pelican!"

The little cattleman shook his head without speaking. He saw a quick-moving shadow dart away from the bunk house, and then the big gun-

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slinger struck down for the tilted handle of his six-gun. With the move, Sober Sandy shifted like a flash of light while his own hand was dipping toward his scabbard.

Gun thunder ripped the still morning air when Squint Barlow slipped his hammer just as his gun came up. The bullet tugged at the old cattleman's vest just as his boot came down to stop his shift. Squint Barlow caught the bucking gun high in his hand and eared the hammer back on the recoil, and all his movements were fast compared to the cool deliberation of Sober Sandy Sawtelle.

The old cattleman's gun cleared leather and leveled down while his thumb was rocking back the filed hammer. He slipped the smooth metal to beat Barlow to the second shot by a heartbeat of time, and the big man's gun exploded high in the air when he was jerked back under the hammering impact of Sawtelle's bullet.

Squint Barlow teetered like a wind-blown mustang and fought to catch his balance. He tried desperately to bring his gun arm up. With eyes that knew all a gun fighter's answers, Sober Sandy stood and watched him fight the losing battle.

The wide-shouldered hombre took one step forward and then crashed down, with the smoking gun slipping from his big hand. The old cattleman was staring at the twitching boots when Smilin' Carson came up on the run and slid to a stop.

"He get you, boss?" he barked sharply. "I seen him get in first shot!"

"It ain't always the first shot that counts, son," the old cattleman said softly, and jacked the spent shell from his gun. "He shot at where I wasn't, which gave me time to line my sights. I ain't so fast as I used to be, but I never learned to throw off my shots!"

"I never cut in on you," Carson said in a slow, clear voice. "Like on round-up, both sides give and take a rep. I'm asking you to remember that!"

Old Sawtelle thumbed a fresh shell through the loading gate and took time to digest the cowboy's meaning. "You asking me to stay out when you ride in to Rawhide?" he asked quietly.

"You didn't need any help, and that goes for me," Carson answered with a grim smile. "Well?"

"He started this whole thing," the old cattleman growled, and jerked a gnarled thumb at the body in the bright sunlight.

Smilin' Carson nodded. "And he's dead," he reminded pointedly. "You ain't so young as you used to be, Sober. You done asked me to sign on to ramrod the 3 S spread, but it looks like I don't want the job!"

"What's the reason you don't?" Sawtelle demanded. "Only this morning you gave me yore word!"

"I don't work for a jigger who don't give me the same as I give him," Carson answered flatly. "I stayed out of yore ruckus, and you stay out of mine!"

"Now looky, Smilin'," the old cattleman pleaded. "I've lived most of my life, and I ain't missed a thing. You ain't but twenty-one—what a feller might call just startin' to live. On top o' that, Van Dyke Thompson is just my size!"

"Size don't make no never minds to a .45 Colt," the cowboy answered coldly. "Thompson don't go off half-cocked like his pard yonder, and you and I both know it!"

"He's the fastest gun-slinger in west Texas," Sawtelle growled hoarsely.

"Yeah," Carson echoed softly.

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"And what chance would you have agin' him?"

"He might get in the first shot, but I'd get him going down," the cattleman growled.

"No," Carson said with a shake of his head. "He puts 'em where he calls 'em, and he wouldn't need but one shot. I don't aim to let him use that one!"

"Now look, Smilin'," the old cattleman pleaded. "I never see the time yet when you wasn't smilin', and you ain't nowise cut out to be a killer. Van Dyke would tie a knot in his tally string for you, shore as sin!"

"He ain't tied it yet," the cowboy answered with a grin. "And it'll be high noon by the time I get back to Rawhide. You still want me to ramrod the 3 S, or do I roll my soogans before I start to town?"

"You dang yearlin' knothead!" Sober Sandy whined in his throat. "You done signed on this morning to rod the outfit, so that makes you the boss. I'll stay out, like you said, but I'm takin' seconds on that whiskered skunk if he cuts a sandy and jumps the gun!"

"You got to notify the sheriff about that corpse yonder, so you might as well ride on in to town along with me," Smilin' suggested carelessly. "When I got a date with a gent, I hate to keep him waitin'!"

III.

Smilin' Carson narrowed his eyes when he and Sawtelle rounded a bend in the winding street of Rawhide. A roan cayuse was just leaving the sheriff's office, and the rider perched high in the saddle looked like a small boy with a man's hat cuffed to the back of his head.

"We better stop while you report to Sheriff Blaine," Carson said to the old cattleman. "That was Van Dyke Thompson just leavin' the jail, and I don't understand all I see!"

"Don't let's do it," Sawtelle barked. "Sam Blaine will try for to stop us with some little old excuse like disturbin' the peace!"

"That's just what I was thinkin'," the cowboy answered quietly. "Swing down, ol'-timer, and loop yore reins!"

Sober Sandy scowled, but he dismounted and made a ground-hitch to anchor his horse. Smilin' Carson hitched up his gun belt and set his holster with a twitch of his fingers before he stepped into the little office in front of the jail.

"Funny," he muttered. "Old Sam ain't here!"

The old cattleman clutched his arm and pointed to some bright-red spots near the narrow hall leading back to the cells. Smilin' Carson took the lead and high-heeled down the hall, and both men stopped with a jerk when a low groan came from one of the cells. The cowboy ran to the door and peered between the bars.

"It's old Sam," he whispered to Sawtelle. "Cuffed with his own bracelets, and the cell door locked!"

"Hey, shur'ff!" the old cattleman called anxiously. "What you doin' in there?"

"Unlock that door and let me out o' here," a weak voice answered. "I'll git that sneakin' killer if it's the last mortal thing I do!"

"It would be, and we ain't got any keys," Sawtelle answered soothingly. "We saw Thompson ridin' away, and Smilin' got suspicious. You hurted bad, Sam?"

"You, Smilin'!" the sheriff answered hoarsely. "You can't make

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a six-gun shoot-out in Rawhide while I'm on the loose!"

"Which you ain't," the cowboy chuckled. "Now you better tell me and Sober what happened."

"I went up to the saloon and got that runty skunk," the sheriff muttered. "Put him under arrest for disturbin' the peace just to keep him from killin' you. He come down here peaceable enough, but when we got in the office, he slapped me over the skull with his cutter and cuffed me with my own bracelets!"

"You should have dehorned him first," the old cattleman grunted. "Where's the keys?"

"He took 'em along after he dragged me back here and locked me in this cell," the sheriff muttered.

"We'll get you out," Carson said confidently. "Just you wait right here, sheriff. It only lacks a little bit to being noon!"

Smilin' Carson left his horse tied to the rail in front of the jail. Then he cuffed his Stetson low to shade his eyes, and only his mouth was smiling when he spoke to Sawtelle.

"You take the other side of the street, Sober. And mind yore promise!"

The old cattleman nodded, not trusting himself to speak. He glanced at the shadow of the rail and found only a thin edge on the far side. There would be no shadow when the sun was directly overhead, and it lacked perhaps three minutes to that time. Carson followed Sawtelle's glance and squared his shoulders when the dark line disappeared.

High noon!

The Red Dog Saloon was half a block up the street on his side. Every man in town knew of the fight, and most of them were lounging carelessly against the buildings across the street.

A roan cayuse cut out from a cluster of cottonwoods. A little man slid from the saddle with incredible speed and dropped his reins to the ground.

Smilin' Carson stared for a moment, and then began to breathe deeply. Van Dyke Thompson brushed his slender fingers against the handle of his gun and stepped to the middle of the street, away from his horse. His little pointed beard glistened in the bright sun when he nodded and began to walk with measured tread.

Smilin' Carson watched the tiny boots and fell into step without knowing that he did so. They would meet in front of the Red Dog if he hobbled his stride, and he shortened his steps to match those of the little man.

Little clouds of dust spiraled up and hung in the air every time Thompson put down a boot. The cowboy was smiling now, with his lips parted to show strong white teeth. Closer and closer they came, and both men stopped as though by mutual agreement right in front of the saloon. Thompson figured the distance as ten paces and nodded his little head as if satisfied.

"It lacks mebbe a minute," he said evenly. "What about Squint Barlow?"

"Dead," Carson answered laconically. "We rode by to let the sheriff know!"

He saw Thompson jerk his head forward, and the cowboy widened his smile. "You see the sher'ff?" Thompson asked sharply.

Carson nodded. "Yeah," he drawled. "I promised to get the keys and turn him loose. When I say the time she's—*high noon!*"

Van Dyke Thompson struck down for his gun with the flicking, decep-

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tive speed of a cat. His slender fingers wrapped about the handle of his .45, and his thumb was cocking the hammer when he made his draw. Smilin' Carson matched him move for move, and added one of his own.

His right boot shifted swiftly to the side to draw him over while his gun was shedding leather. Both weapons roared like thunder, with no stuttering pause to separate the explosions, and neither man had time for a follow-up.

Van Dyke Thompson was picked up by the battering slug of lead and hurled to the ground on his back. Smilin' Carson was whirled into a half turn when Thompson's bullet scraped his ribs, and he stumbled and went down before he could catch his balance. He rolled up, thumbing back the hammer, and then he lowered it when he saw his enemy lying in the dust like a worn rope.

He climbed to his feet and shook his head to clear the fog, and then he walked ten paces and hunkered down beside the body. A crimsoned banner was spreading across Thompson's shirt on the left side, and Carson leaned forward and gingerly took the ring of keys he could see sticking from the lower vest pocket.

Sober Sandy Sawtelle raced up and grabbed his new ramrod's arm. "Yo're hit, Smilin'," he whispered hoarsely. "It come that close to being a draw!"

Carson shrugged with a smile and handed the keys to the old cattleman. "Just a scratch," he drawled. "Now you better high-tail down to the jail and turn the sheriff loose. Better report about the corpse yonder, on account of me havin' business right away out on the spread. Just tell him it was high-noon show-down!"

DOD

TWO OLD-TIMERS PASS ON

Two popular old-time stagecoach drivers took their last trip over the Great Divide in Montana a short time ago. Alex C. Waugh died on May 5 last at Dillon, where he had lived for many years after his driving days were over. He was seventy-eight years old. As a young man he went to Idaho, where he was employed as a driver on the stage line that ran from Salmon to Junction in that State.

When the stagecoaches were withdrawn he took up mining, and met with varying success in Idaho and Montana. He was fond of telling stories of life in mining camps, miners' courts, claim jumping, and other incidents that brought some excitement into the otherwise dull existence of the miners. He had many interesting experiences to relate.

The other old-timer, Jesse Shorett, died about the same time as Waugh, in Butte, Montana. He went to Idaho, too, after spending a short time in the gold diggings in Montana. He gave that up to take over a ranch in Idaho. Later, he became owner and driver of the stage line between Leadore and Gilmore in Idaho. He drove the last Concord stage over that line before the coming of the railway, and some time later he returned to Butte, where he remained for the rest of his life.

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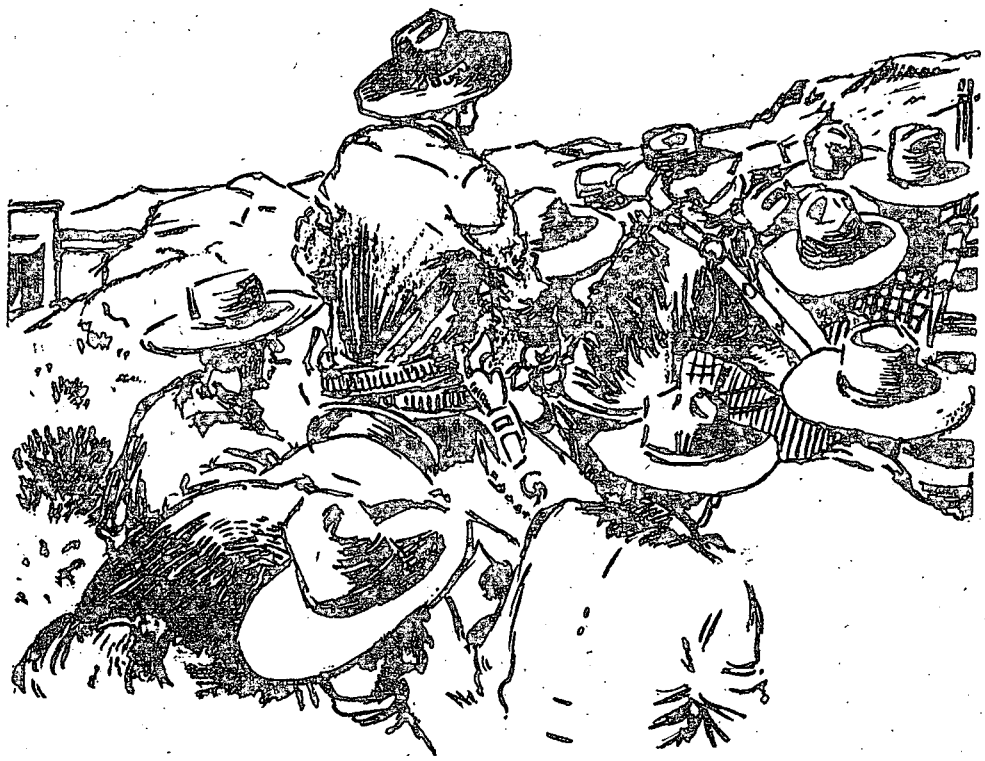
Hostage of the Gallows

The Silver Kid ain't sidin' outlaws, but he shore aims to keep this un from bein' hung.



CHAPTER I.

THE WADDY CALLS A DRAW.

THE Kid was moving cautiously toward that camp-fire glow on the open prairie. Outlined against the quarter moon, he saw the hooded form of the bed-wagon that marked the camp as a round-up spread, but even this didn't reassure him. For that land west of the Striped Stone Hills had a reputation for not being halter-broken to the law. It was a country used to dealing its own justice smack-dab from the holster and no questions asked afterward—the dead don't parley so well.

"Solo" Strant, the "Silver Kid," knew those things. But when he saw the horsemen coming down the stage road at right angles to the faint trail he was following, and then spotted the shadowy figure of the

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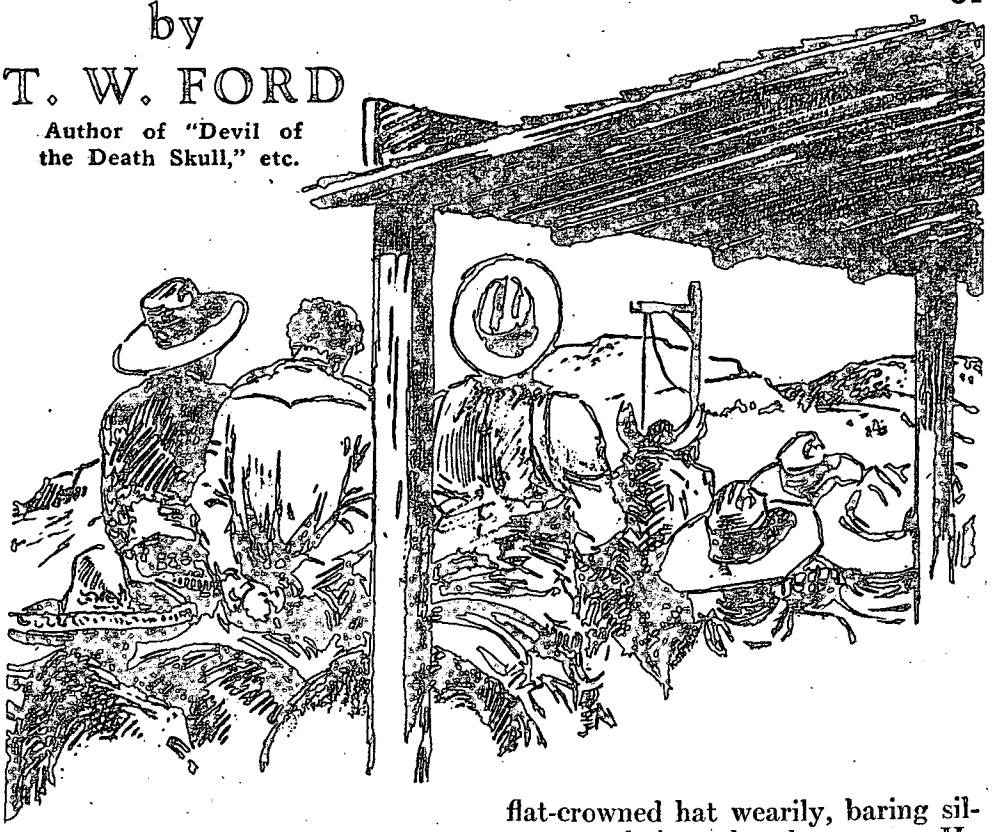
by

T. W. FORD

Author of "Devil of the Death Skull," etc.



furtive rider trailing that rider, Solo was doubly watchful.

Deftly he sidled Sorghum, his well-trained paint cayuse, onto some brown, curly buffalo grass that muffled its hoofs; then he advanced. He saw that trailing rider dimly, saw him drop from the saddle and run forward, leading his pony. The Silver Kid worked forward to the crossing of the trails, and pulled up a moment in the shadow of a clump of gently rustling cottonwoods. His hand went to that tiny silver skull that joined the chin strings of his sombrero, and he fingered it a moment. It was a never-failing sign that gun hammers were due to smash down pronto.

The first rider veered off toward the fire of the wagon camp. Solo saw him push back a flat-brimmed, flat-crowned hat wearily, baring silver-gray hair under the moon. He was a stoop-shouldered man as small as the Kid himself. The Colt .45 strapped on his hip seemed to drag at his frail body. The night breeze carried the weary, hacking sound of his cough back to the Silver Kid.

Solo Strant's eyes went to pick out the hombre trailing that man like an evil shadow. Doubled, he was vanishing behind a low rise in the range that ran toward the wagon camp. Even Solo's catlike eyes would have missed him if the dull glitter of the bared gun barrel in his hand hadn't caught moonlight for a moment. Then he was gone from sight. And in the same moment, the Kid had slid silently from the saddle, ground-anchored his paint horse by flipping the reins forward over its head, and moved swiftly after the endangered old rider.

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Like a ghost, he hurried through the night, crouched, using every clump of brush, his hands hooked half across his body in the start of his deadly cross-arm draw. He went faster as the silver-haired rider rode into the fringe of the camp-fire glow. It outlined him, made him a perfect target for a dry-gulcher's shot.

The Kid veered over toward where the skulking gent should have been, but he could see no sign of him. Solo's weapons slithered from his oil-worked holsters, and cocked them as he wheeled. Still, no slash of powder-shot lead ripped at the old man's back.

Then the latter had called out to the cowmen around the camp fire. Somebody spoke back.

"Howdy, Judge Trevan. Light an' split a bean!"

As Judge Trevan stiffly dismounted, Solo crept closer. He knew a play was going to be made soon. But it came from a corner the deadly Kid never could have expected.

The judge had walked tiredly forward, coughing once again. From the distance came the rumbling sound of the herd on bed ground. Hoofbeats cut through it. The form of an advancing nighthawk rider showed at the far side of the firelight. He dropped from his saddle and started to bawl for some java. Then he heard the judge speaking and cut himself short.

"Boys, I better tell yuh. As yuh know, Mel Marsh stood trial to-day. The—uh—jury—uh—they found him guilty."

The judge stopped speaking for a moment as if it hurt him. There was a sputtering sound as one of the wagon-camp hands, hunkered down, spat into the fire and straightened suddenly. The nighthawk who'd just come off duty flipped away his quirly in a shower of sparks. Beyond the firelight, Solo Strant could feel the mounting tension.

"I know he was one of the boys ridin' with this spread once," the aged judge went on, "but—he was guilty. I sentenced him to be hung. To-morrow at noon, they'll string him up!"

There was silence. Some place far off, a coyote bayed. One of the men kicked at the sod, swore, then said if the judge thought Mel was guilty, he sure must have been. It was all right.

"All right, nothin'!" It came in a choked scream. It was the night rider who'd just come in. He came striding forward, his mouth working over words that wouldn't come out, his face a suddenly paled mask.

"Little Jack!" the straw boss of the outfit barked at him.

But "Little Jack," a towering hulk of a ranny, walked into the firelight from the other side, with drawn mouth and seared eyes.

"He—Mel—he—he couldn't 'a' been guilty. Even if he was"—Little Jack swore—"yuh can't string him up! There must be same mistake. Mel Marsh, he used to be my saddle pard an' if he hangs——"

Then Little Jack cursed in a whisper, and grabbed for gun steel in his holster.

"Draw!" he bawled at the judge.

Shaking his head slowly, Judge Trevan just stood. It all happened so quickly the rest of the spread had time to do nothing. In a split second, Little Jack had a gun snout out and flicking level, his felt hand jumping over to fan it. Killing hatred was plainly stamped on his face.

And Solo, unseen out there, whipped into action. His hands ripped up, filled. Little Jack was just uncocking the gun hammer. But one of the Kid's weapons barked, and its lead had already sped

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on its deadly path. At the final instant, Little Jack leaped backward, his gun hand jerking upward as if stung.

His Frontier-model Colt spat, but its slug flung skyward at the moon. And the cowhand, just come in from his night-herding job, stood transfixed, staring at the now gunless hand he held before his eyes. For across the back of it, painful yet harmless as a wound, was the red stripe of a bullet track that had creased it.

The cow camp stood stunned for seconds. At first, nobody could understand how it had happened. Both his guns poised to flame again if necessary, Solo ran forward into the firelight. The judge turned toward him with hand instinctively outstretched. But the stunned Little Jack came out of it and headed for Judge Trevan. Graceful and gliding as a ghost, Solo stepped around the latter and had the disarmed Little Jack covered.

Then a third gun erupted on the night. Its bullet knifed from beyond the fire glow, too. But it didn't slash at the judge as the Kid expected. Instead it drilled through the flesh of the gunless, Little Jack's ribs. With a cursing howl, the cowhand went down. And a moment later, the hombre who'd shot that third time, the man Solo had seen trailing the judge, came hobbling into view.

"Jedge! Jedge," he cackled, "are yuh all right?"

It was Old Miley, the bartender at the Caspar Saloon and town jailer in his spare time. He was a hunchback with thin, dragging legs and crossed eyes that looked out on the world with a simple expression. He seemed as helpless as all get-out. And when he explained he'd secretly followed the judge out from town because he feared trouble over the hanging, everybody including Judge Trevan guffawed.

But Solo Strant's faint smile was a mask. His sleepy-looking eyes glided over Old Miley. And there was something about the man—perhaps his cackling voice or maybe his overly helpless look—that didn't ring true. Old Miley seemed too good to be real.

Then the Kid glanced behind him to where they were bandaging up Little Jack's scratch in the light of a lantern hung from the bed-wagon tail board. In its rays, the red crease of the Kid's bullet track showed like bright paint on the hairpin's hand. Solo's eyes saddened. Little Jack was just a hot-headed cowhand, but a man who wore that bullet brand soon joined the Boot Hill spread.

CHAPTER II.

KIDNAPED!

FOR a while, they hunkered down about the fire, talking it over. A jug of redeye was passed. The shy Kid shrugged off the compliment on his gun-wizardry and watched them take Little Jack to a soogan on the other side of the wagon.

Building a quirly with his deft fingers, Solo listened to the story of the trial and the sentenced man. He sat in silence as he let smoke drift from his lean nose, taking it in.

It seemed the judge was known as "Four-square" Trevan, a regular stone wall for upholding the law. This Mel Marsh, the condemned man, had been a member of the Boylan Bunch, a lobo outfit. Captured, he'd stood trial for the murder of the freight agent at Creosote Junction.

In a raid there, the Boylan Bunch had robbed the railway office safe

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and the agent had been drilled through the heart. Four witnesses had taken the stand to swear they'd seen Mel Marsh, the slickest, fastest gun passer in the Boylan band, trigger on the agent when he'd grabbed up the old Sharps rifle beside his desk.

"So I had to sentence him to be hung," Judge Four-square Trevan said as he concluded his story. "Guilty—guilty as they come!"

One of the camp wagon outfit, from the Block J, said that Mel had always been a hot-headed one. The talk dwindled off, and men began to turn in. Solo Strant wrapped himself in his blanket and lay for a long time staring up at the stars.

"Yep, that Mel Marsh shore was lightnin'-fast poison from the holster," Old Miley said to one of the spread as he took a last draw at the redeye before turning in. "The Boylan Bunch shore will miss him plenty!" Then he hobbled away to bed down.

The place became quiet except for the tinkle of the bell mare of the *remuda* and the whisper of the night wind in the canvas of the wagon. The Kid's fingers raised to where the silver skull hung beneath his jaw when he wore his battered, black sombrero. He sensed trouble. It didn't make sense. But he finally rose, took his saddle off the bed wagon, and went out and saddled his Sorghum paint horse where he'd picketed it. Then he turned in and slept.

It seemed he'd hardly put his head down when it happened. The night was abruptly alive with shots. Horsemen were pounding through the camp. The Kid jerked upright, clutching for the two Colts he'd laid next to his head. But, even as he reached for them, the foreleg of a pony grazed his shoulder, and sent him spinning. It was a raid on the camp.

Solo was sent rolling, finally came to a stop half stunned as his head hit a rock. The first thing he thought of was rustlers. The place was in an uproar, sleepy-eyed man stumbling around, the earth shaking with the tromp of ponies, guns slashing the half light of the first dawn. A man was pinioned back against the wheel of the bed wagon by a slug that dug into his shoulder. The straw boss dropped under the blow of the gun barrel of a rider who stretched from the saddle to bat him down.

Hunched, the Kid got back to his bed roll and guns. In the dimness, it was hard to see anything, to tell friend from enemy. Then some hand flung brush onto the embers of the fire, bawling out as he did.

"The Boylan Bunch! The Boylan Bunch! There's Sil Boylan!"

The Kid saw a big man with a red bandanna around his neck who laughed as he triggered while forking a plunging horse that raced through the camp. Solo Strant tried to throw down on him. But fire smoke screened the man the next moment. The Kid just got a glimpse of his roan-red face in the half light, of his huge hook of a nose that gave him a hawkish look. Then he was gone.

It seemed for a moment as if the raid was over. Then, it was worse. Lead rained out of the dark. The Boylan hombres had wheeled to whip hot lead out of the waning night at the camp. It made it hard to do anything. The Solo man stood there with his guns cocked and ready. But there were only muzzle flares to shoot at, flashes that whipped like flickering eyes.

"Where's the jedge?" yelped Old

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Miley who appeared from the other side of the bed wagon. "Where——"

A stray slug clipped his trousers leg and he went down into the grass, swearing. Then one side of the camp fire flared abruptly higher. The Kid had a split-second picture of the judge, Four-square Trevan, being forced into an empty saddle at the point of a gun. Two Boylan riders flanked him. It was some distance off. But the icy-nerved Kid dropped to one knee as he slid one of his Colts out horizontal. As he was about to trigger, a horseman's slug ripped past his nose and dug the dirt not a foot away.

The Kid jerked around to see a bobbing rider drawing bead on him a second time in the turmoil. Solo's left-hand weapon snaked out a tongue of livid powder flame. The lobo almost pitched backward from the saddle as he saw the faint daylight abruptly through a newly cut hole in the front of his hat brim.

Swearing softly, the Kid leaped forward to send another slug toward him, but a stampeded Block J hand crashed into him from behind. When Solo rose, with the whole camp bawling crazily, the rider was gone. He twisted around the other way. The judge was nowhere in sight. They had kidnaped him; even now their hoofbeats were beginning to grow duller.

The Silver Kid never hesitated. He got his bearings, then hurtled his lithe body toward where he'd left his Sorghum paint picketed. He was in the saddle and bolting the pony off while half of the Block J bunch still didn't know what had happened. And Solo was calling himself names because he'd been unable to make a real play.

He swung northward where he'd seen those kidnapers vanishing. Solo was outnumbered if he did succeed in overhauling them. But the Kid was a gun gambler extraordinary, who did not stop to count the chances once he'd tossed his shells into the game.

As he pounded along, the distant *crang* of gunshot drifted back to him. The lobos were shooting their way through something. A few minutes later, he discovered the trouble, veering his course to work toward the muzzle flashes.

The herd on bed ground, disturbed by the uproar, had begun to break up. Horns clicking ominously in the first hint of a stampede, bunches of critters were swirling off from the main herd, spreading across the range. The Boylan bunch had had to fight and force their way through them.

Pursuing them, the Kid had to work and wriggle a course through them, too. A single, spreading ray of light speared through a cut in the hills, showing him riders strewn across the range. The outlaws had been spread by the cattle.

Dropping into a hollow, Solo lost them momentarily. But when he crested a rise, he saw they were making no attempt to rejoin each other, evidently thinking of the danger of pursuit and knowing where their hide-out was. His catlike eyes picked out one handful, three men clustered around a fourth rider, moving slower than the others. In a flash, Solo knew that the judge was there.

The dull rumble of the herd's hoofs shook the range and filled the air as Solo spurred on harder. He caught a glimpse of the judge's silvery locks, and closed in faster. One of his Colts coughed into the rising dawn. It echoed its first shot with another. A lobo rider who'd edged out from the group went pitching from his saddle. The Kid came rushing on as the two other guards of the

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judge looked back. Lead, wild driven, came in Solo's direction and only made his eyes take on a sleepier look.

The show-down came quickly, suddenly. The big man with the judge waved a smoking gun and his companion abruptly wheeled about to handle the pursuer. But the Kid had been expecting exactly that, and he sent his paint in a sharp semicircle, bending low in the steamy mists sifting up from the damp prairie.

Too late, the lone rider spotted him. He fired wildly again. Solo triggered. The man ripped up straight-legged in the stirrups, grabbing at the side of his head that had been raked by the Kid's slug. Then the lobo yanked his cayuse around and rode desperately off after his mate and the judge.

The Kid streaked in pursuit, and overtook the man. Stretching from the saddle, Solo slammed his gun barrel down over the other's head, was racing past him before he pitched to the ground. He holstered that weapon with its spent shells and dug out his other, with the thunder of the stampeded herd still filling the air. And the next moment, he saw himself riding into a trap.

The lone guard left with the judge had flung from the saddle, dragging Four-square Trevan down, too. Now that man waited on the ground, a cocked gun protruding beyond the body of the judge whom he used as a shield. It was the red-hued face of Sil Boylan himself, the leader.

The Kid slid from the saddle and scampered out sidewise before Sil Boylan could throw down on him. It became a silent duel, a feud of waiting, a test of which hombre was the more daring.

"Come closer, feller——" For the deadly Kid had begun to creep forward in the uncertain light. "Yo're him—*the Silver Kid!*" Boylan's voice went thin and harsh. "Yuh might git me with a slug, but I'll plug the judge here pronto if yuh do!"

He had recognized the Kid. Any gent who'd ever seen him before would never forget him. At first glance, he might have been just another rider of the grubstake line, a half-pint of wasp-waisted younker in rusty black rig with a boyish face and sleepy-looking eyes. You'd figure that the worst weapon he'd pack in his saddle roll would be a harmonica. But there were telltale signs.

First off, there were those spurs, the dull rowels fashioned from Mexican silver dollars. More silver in the form of conchas decorated his batwing, leather chaps. The double cartridge belts that girded his slim waist held those holsters that sprouted the silver-stocked guns. Up the front of his patched black shirt were twin rows of silver buttons. The hatband of his weather-beaten black sombrero bore conchas of the same metal, too.

And finally, beneath his lean-hewn jaw, gleaming faintly in the damp dawn, was the trinket no man could miss, that few men forgot. It was the last thing many a poor devil saw through gun smoke. It was the tiny but terribly lifelike silver skull that joined the chin strings of his sombrero.

Sil Boylan was right. It was Solo Strant, the Silver Kid himself. And the Kid was catfooting it forward, straight at the black muzzle of the lobo leader's .45, trying to get as close as possible before being compelled to shoot. The Kid was thinking of the trapped judge.

So was Boylan. He didn't want to risk a lead duel with the Silver Kid. A sly smile cracking his face,

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he switched his weapon around to point at the judge's silver hair. The gesture forced the Solo man to halt, to hesitate as he tried to figure a way out.

Four-square Trevan started to lift an arm as his mouth opened to speak. But Sil Boylan throttled him with the free arm he had around the judge's windpipe and all sound was shut off. The Kid sensed that it was some warning, but he couldn't figure what. And he didn't dare give that crafty outlaw leader a single fraction of a chance to make a play. It was a cat-and-mouse game.

Then Solo Strant felt, rather than heard, the half-whisper of crushed-down grass behind him. It had a slithery, snaky sound. He saw Sil Boylan's smirk widen. Too late, he dropped into a half crouch to offer less of a target for Boylan as he swung. He had a momentary picture of the hombre he'd wounded, then batted from his horse. The gent had possessed a tougher skull than the Kid had figured; he had come to, and had crept up behind him. The rest of it was wiped out by a descending gun barrel that came down on Solo's forehead with a thud like falling doom.

The sun was staring straight into his dizzy eyes when the Kid came to. When he sat up, it seemed as if his skull was trying to burst itself. The bottom of the shaly gulch swam sickeningly before his eyes. Then he remembered what had happened, and knew they had gotten away with the judge despite his efforts to prevent it. On his knees, he twisted around for sight of the cow camp, and could see nothing but empty plain. He hadn't realized how far he'd ridden in the man hunt.

Something crackled in the region of his chest. Peering down, he saw it was a folded piece of paper that had been pinned to his shirt. He swore at the throbbing lump on his forehead that half blinded him, and tore the paper loose. On the outside was crudely printed:

Take This to the Sherif of Caspar

The injured Solo fumbled it open and focused his eyes under the new-risen sun. It read:

Listen sherif. We got Four-square Trevan. Now go head and hang our man, Mel Marsh—and we do the same to the judge. Take yore choice

The Boylan Bunch

The Kid reeled to his feet, realizing that he had to get to Caspar in time to halt that hanging!

CHAPTER III.

THE HANGING OF MEL MARSH.

IT was just before high noon when the Silver Kid swung around a curve in the sunken stage road and into the cow town of Caspar. It was a big, flashy place, a study in contrasts, plainly running with a heap of dinero. Squalid shacks crouched next to big, two-storied buildings with flashy gilt signs. Beside a horse-high refuse heap of débris a red-lettered sign proudly boasted:

Site of Caspar's New Railroad Station

The Kid couldn't even see a suspicion of tracks. Farther down the main street was a half-finished framework labeled the "New city hall." There were whisky mills and fancy gambling dives aplenty. A store with big glass windows was stuffed with gaudy costumes for women. The sign in an undertaker's place told that the establishment had the best coffins and that tombstones could be had on order. At the main

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corners, a broad, crooked side street was jammed with more saloons, dance halls, and gambling palaces.

Solo Strant got the picture in a flash—a reckless, boisterous place spring into wild, half-tamed growth. But he wasn't interested in that, as he rode through a lane lined by scores of hitched ponies and buggies and spring ranch wagons.

His eyes lighted on the seamed adobe building with the iron-barred front windows that was the jail. He raised his canteen to his dry lips for a final swig before the business in hand, which he knew would be tough. Then he realized that the town was strangely still, strangely empty. Only children and some old, white-headed men and a few women moved about. He couldn't see any sign of a hanging—a gallows or a hempen necktie over a limb.

The Kid froze. He had figured he'd made it in time. Back in that gulch, he'd found his faithful Sorghum waiting by a clump of sagebrush. And he'd hardly mounted to try and locate the wagon camp to learn where the town lay when a hoeman had come down the cut in a cart. He'd told Solo to go on up the gulch and take the first fork to the right, which would bring him out pronto onto the stage road into Caspar. And the Kid had ridden hard despite his aching head.

A deep-throated, dull roar came down the crooked street. The Kid shaded his eyes against the blistering sun, and saw the cloud of dust that began to eddy up from the side of a steep mound at the town's edge. The hot prairie breeze split the dust a moment, and the Kid made out the close knot of horsemen. They were moving at a walk, hemmed in by a huge mass of people, as they moved up the sharp incline. And at the top, crazily contorted by the dancing heat devils, was a weather-beaten gibbet with a gleaming string of new manila rope hanging from it.

Loosening his Colts in their scabbards as he spurred the paint, the Kid headed toward the scene. Repeatedly he lost sight of it as he raced between the buildings of the winding street. Now these buildings thinned to scattered groups. He reached the base of the desolate, treeless mound, and squinted through the dust churned up by scores of boots.

A minute later, he almost ran down one of the stragglers with his horse. A rumbling chorus of mixed threats, oaths, and epithets of triumph at the hanging seethed back to him. The crowd wasn't ugly, but it evidently had its heart set on this necktie party going through.

The Kid tried to cut through, but they were too closely packed. He could just see the sheriff with the star flashing on his vest, some deputies, and the condemned hombre riding with his hands lashed behind. Then an irate townsmen grabbed at the bridle of the Kid's horse as he tried to fight through to the sheriff. Another citizen yanked a Colt and told Solo to stay back.

"Feller come intuh town early a-sayin' there weren't goin' to be no hangin'," one gent claimed.

"Nothin' had better try to stop stringin' up this Marsh polecat!" another snarled.

The Kid overheard the remark as he wheeled his pony back and forth to try to force an alley through the mob. It was no use. He thought fast; he had to get to that sheriff. The sound had risen to a din, a deafening uproar, as the group of the law halted with the mounted prisoner under the noose rope. Mel Marsh's black hair shone ravenlike as they lifted his sombrero.

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And Solo Strant, as the crowd surged upward, pressing in still more tightly, saw his chance. His quick-witted mind grasped the possibilities, measured the danger. A small mound jutted up from the side of the big one. And perched on it like a toad on a stool, was a shack that bore a sign describing it as the "Punchers Hotel and Saloon."

Solo drove his paint around to it, knuckling the dust from his lazy-looking eyes that had the keenness of a hawk's. He was going to need those eyes, and need them bad. He came to the smaller hump, curved behind it, hit the dust before the paint had slid to a halt. Running up the straggly back steps in the rear of the place, he reached the wooden platform at the back door, and peered in with guns already drawn. The two-bit joint was empty except for a saddle tramp who lay in a bleary-eyed stupor beneath a table.

Catfooting in, the desperate Kid hustled to the front of the place where the double doors stood flung wide. He had a clear view of the proceedings over the heads of the crowd, yet he was very little lower than the lawmen working up there in the tiny, cleared space. The Kid's lips stirred in a prayer of thanks as a puff of wind cleared the brownish haze from the crest of that mound. For he was already crouched behind a chair, using it to steady his leveled gun arm.

The sheriff up there was just offering the condemned man a last drink. The bottle crashed on the ground as the John Law grabbed at his sombrero. He ripped it off, goggle-eyed. There was a clean-drilled bullet hole through its high, pearl-gray crown. And down in the two-bit barroom, smoke snaked up from the muzzle of the Silver Kid's leveled gun.

Then the crowd realized what had happened. There was a tense hush. And from the dimness of the saloon, the Kid's gun barked clearly, then spoke its piece again. Lead whistled between the stunned sheriff and one of his deputies up there on the mound top, clearing both of them by scarcely a foot. Then the uproar broke loose.

"The Boylan Bunch!" came the chorused shout of hate.

And, like an angry wave, the townsmen, turning in their tracks, started to swing toward the little, lopsided saloon perched on the smaller mound like a disreputable sombrero. Inside it, the Kid smiled grimly. He had no intention of making any one-man stand, of putting the stake of his life into the game to save that convicted murderer waiting under the noose. But he was thinking of that silver-haired judge who'd packed the courage of his belief.

Again he sent a horneting shell toward the lawman group. The deputy on the end of the rope over the gibbet jumped back. The tumult of the crowd increased as they swept toward the saloon. Solo stepped a little farther back into the dimness as wild-flung lead spattered the place.

The bleary-eyed waddy beneath the table stirred his head a little. "Stop that all-fired pianer playin'," he mumbled.

Solo lifted one gun-bearing hand to rub the silver skull suspended beneath his jaw. Then he slapped four or five well directed shots at the first of the nearing crowd. Dirt sprayed up near the boots of a big man in a miner's slouch hat. A Caspar citizen flung his Sharps rifle high as he threw himself sidewise at the whistle of lead. Solo's other slugs snarled discomfortingly close—close enough to halt them.

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There was a bellow from above and behind. And the sheriff, with some of his aides, came pounding down the slope to deal with the sniper in the barroom. The pack opened to let the law handle it. Everybody believed it was an attempt by the Boylan outfit to rescue their doomed partner.

"The chips are down," Solo muttered to himself as he swiftly backed, thumbing fresh shells into his hot weapons.

Then he was back out the rear door, and down the steps to his waiting pony. He hadn't been sure about his next move. But as the maddened mob rushed downslope again behind the sheriff, the play was shown him. The hot breeze off the range drifted fresh, blinding blankets of dust across the whole scene.

Taking a long-shot gamble, the Kid rode out from behind the projecting stub of earth, full into the dust clouds. Screened in his daring move, the deadly cool Kid whipped out around the base of the mound, circling it to the side farthest from the town and the crowd. The whole world seemed to throb with their uproar.

CHAPTER IV.

THE HAND OF THE LAW.

THE Kid sent his paint up the steep slope. And when he saw the manacled prisoner guarded by a lone deputy, the Kid took a more daring chance than even before. He holstered his silver-butted guns. Hearing his approach, the deputy twisted in his saddle, throwing around a sawed-off shotgun at ready.

"Wait, stranger, if——" he began, half crazy with his responsibility.

"Friend o' Judge Trevan's," the Kid said casually, gazing beyond him to the Striped Stone hills in the distance as if there was nothing to worry about.

"What's goin' on down there? Who's makin' the trouble?"

Solo shrugged at the excited younker of a deputy. "Who do yuh reckon?" He spat out his dead stub of quirly.

The deputy jumped an inch out of his saddle. "Leavin' me up here all alone with this—an' them Boylans——"

Solo played his bluff ace as the uproar below welled again with the crowd seething around the propped-up barroom where Solo had been.

"Reckon the sheriff figures the prisoner'd be a heap safer in the jail," said Solo.

The deputy whipped around in the saddle again, his eyes wide with fright and with hope. He hadn't gotten what the Kid said, as the low-speaking Solo had intended.

"Sheriff Hopple said to git the prisoner to the jail?" He had already wheeled his cayuse. "All right. We'll slip him round the back way! Blast my hide if I ain't plenty relieved not to sit here like a plumb, pretty target no more!"

They started down the back of the mound, the way the Kid had ascended. At its base, with the dust still sifting in great ribbons, they swung on the far side from the Punchers Hotel and Barroom. Back there, the noise had begun to abate. Solo knew they'd found the place empty.

He and the deputy, with Marsh, the prisoner, a pale, unhealthy hairpin with a hacking cough and sunken eyes, between them, moved at a fast trot behind the buildings jutting back from the straggling side street. The deputy kept sleeving sweat from his face and jerking the shotgun around.

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"Through here, mister," he said.

They turned in behind a livery stable set back from the road, both its back and front doors wide open. The trio rode through under the loft of sweet-smelling hay, out an alley, and into the town. A bald-headed man with a crutch, peered up at them.

"They're bringin' Mel Marsh back!" he cackled out. "They're bringin' him back!" He went hobbling off in the direction of the crowd that had gone to the hanging.

The deputy shouted. The horses of the three were swung into a hard gallop only to be jerked in hard before the front of the dobe jail with its cracked walls. The deputy hustled Marsh in through the heavy plank door, a quietly smiling Solo at his heels.

They didn't have to wait long. The building fronts threw off the echoes of scores of running boot heels spattered by the *cloppity-clop* of horse hoofs. Word had gotten to the mob.

Sheriff Hopple, his white mustache flowing in the wind, speeded around a twist in the road, reined in, then dropped gingerly to the ground on his stiff thigh, which had been wounded in the gun battle when they'd taken Mel Marsh. But there was nothing gentle or gingery when he came roaring into the office, sighted the prisoner, then turned on the kid deputy. He started to curse in a blue stream.

"Tim, yuh ding-blasted fool, I told yuh to keep Marsh there on thet hill till the desert froze over if necessary! Yuh——"

"But, sheriff," the deputy broke in quaveringly. "Yuh sent word to take him to the jail! Him here, he told me." He pointed to Solo.

Quirly smoke drifting from his nose, the Kid calmly stepped forward as the deputies of the law came jamming in the door, every hand prodded down on a holster top. Old Miley came doddering in, his flour-sack bartender apron still at his waist. There were some others.

"Sheriff, yore depity's half right. Me, I——"

"Who are yuh?" Hopple spat from under the mustache.

Solo smiled thinly. "Strant's the name. Solo's the first handle, 'cause I always play it alone. Folks call me the Silver Kid."

Hopple nodded, grumbled something about having heard of the Kid. And the latter told his story quickly in the low voice that was always softest when he was in a tight spot. He told about the raid on the Block J camp, and how the judge had been rustled off.

"Yuh chased 'em?" Hopple asked skeptically.

Solo nodded, aware of the chill air of disbelief in the jail office. He shoved up his sombrero and showed the gun bruise on his forehead. Hopple growled that it wasn't a bullet wound and didn't prove much.

"Yuh might be a new un of the Boylan Bunch," the Caspar law chief said. "This might be a trick o' Sil Boylan's. How do I know they got the judge?"

"The note ought tuh prove somethin', mistuh," Solo came back coldly. He told about it.

Hopple kicked a spittoon aside and walked over. "All right. Let's see the note!"

Solo's hand went into his shirt pocket, but he failed to find it. He was plumb sure he'd put it there. But he felt in the pocket inside his chap leg anyway. Somebody swore sarcastically. The Kid grew a little

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pale around the gills. Deputies edged in closer. The Kid pulled out his sack of tobacco, found that pocket empty, went back to the first. And it wasn't there!

"I—I must 'a' lost it," he said. It echoed weakly.

"Lost it, huh? Mebbe Sil Boylan fergot tuh write one, stranger!" The angry sheriff half hooked out his gun as he shot a glance over his shoulder at the street packed with faces.

Solo's eyes knifed around and picked out Old Miley. The bartender-jailer, who'd been out at the camp, was standing and staring at Solo with gaping jaw. A tall, solemn-looking man garbed in plain, dull gray, standing out from the rest because he wore no guns, stepped into the doorway beside Old Miley. The crippled barman looked up at him. Solo faintly heard Miley say:

"This hairpin—gent named Strant—he says Boylan's Bunch rode off with Jedge Trevan!"

The tall, preacherlike gent stiffened. His eyes snapped shut as if he'd been struck a blow in the face. Then he put up a long-fingered white hand and gripped one of hunchbacked Old Miley's arms quickly. But the Kid paid little heed to that. He simply realized Old Miley had been at that bed-wagon camp last night.

"Wait a minute, sheriff," Solo cut in on the gruff, old John Law's demands to tell the truth. "Miley there, he was out to the camp."

The sheriff spun on his heel, then grabbed at his wounded thigh from the pain. Old Miley nodded.

"Uh-huh. I dropped out there after the jedge," he said slowly as if feeling his way, shooting a glance up at the tall, impassive gent. "There was some fuss round daybreak—seemed like some rustlers hit the camp. Yes siree, by gum. Shore was some powder burned."

He seemed vague about it all. The herd had been stampeded and the spread had been flung all over the range to bring them back in. He licked at tobacco juice on his lip.

Solo scowled a little. Then his face took on its boyish yet sphinx-like look again. "Miley, yuh saw me shoot the gun out o' the dewclaw o' the hairpin that tried to plug the judge."

"Don't try to scare an old man an' put words into his mouth there, Silver Kid," cried the tall man who'd just come in.

And Old Miley shook his head again with that foolish look in his crossed eyes. One of them glittered up at the tall man.

"Waal, cain't say thet I did." It was the one thing that would have cleared the Kid in the eyes of the law. "Cain't say so. Mebbe I didn't see."

Instinctively, the Kid took a backward step as he saw the deputies crowding in for him. His hands flickered over his body in the start of the deadly cross-arm draw. He'd jarred back into somebody when he'd backed. It was the prisoner, Mel Marsh, forgotten by them all.

The next instant, Marsh's thin, tearing voice was ripping at them over his shoulder. For he'd flicked his shrunken body around so that his back was toward them. And in a desperate play, with the hands that were tied behind him, he'd yanked one of Solo's guns from a sheath.

"Stand back there, you men! Don't make me shoot!" he warned.

They came smashing at Marsh as he strained his head sidewise over his shoulder with the Colt in that clumsy grip. Solo whipped around like a cat and grappled for the gun.

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The weapon spouted as the Kid rammed the lashed man tightly against the wall.

Sheriff Hopple lurched back to his desk, swearing in fury. The stray slug had smashed the side of a heavy chair and sent a flying splinter painfully into his old leg wound. And the play practically convicted the Silver Kid.

"That proves it!" the stern Hopple blasted, pointing at the Kid. "Grab him! Git his shootin' irons, boys!"

Instantly, the deputies were on the Kid, helpless as he held the frantic, pale prisoner after batting the gun from his grip. They got Solo's silver-plated Colts, turned him around. And Hopple, having pulled the splinter from his leg, told one of the men to get the doc.

"Yep! It shore clinches it, Mr. Silver Kid," Hopple said, facing Solo. "One o' the Boylan Bunch, that's what yuh are! Seen yore other scheme weren't goin' to work so yuh tried to give Marsh the break to smoke his way out!"

Solo merely smiled, his quirly still between his tight lips. He knew parleying wouldn't do any good now.

"Sheriff!" It was the tall man in gray at the door again, he who toted no hoglegs.

Hopple looked around. When he spoke, there was no liking in his voice. But it held something of the awe one feels for a man who is important.

"Yeah, Mr. Rey?"

"Postpone the hangin' a day an' hold this stranger feller with the silver fixings," Rey said in a smooth-talking voice, "until yuh can send out word to the judge's rancho and find out if he's there. That's sense—er—I think it is, anyway," he ended apologetically.

Hopple's big mouth curled, but he nodded. It was sense. "All right. Hangin' to-morrow, then. But even if they have got the jedge, this snake gits strung up anyways!" He nodded to the deputies. "Put 'em in cells."

And Old Miley clattered forward, pulling out his big ring of keys, as Mel Marsh, the killer, and the Silver Kid were ushered into the back.

The Kid twisted around in one last attempt. With the hanging delayed indefinitely, he wanted to be free to hunt out that polecat Boylan bunch and snake the judge away from them.

"Find Little Jack," Solo asked them, figuring the cowhand would have come in for the hanging of his one-time saddle pard. "Find him. He's got my bullet brand on his paw, provin' I gunned him to defend the judge!"

One of the deputies spat and sneered. "Little Jack went through town fust thing this mornin'. He'd drawn his time and was pullin' out fer a new range!"

And Old Miley prodded the Kid none too gently with his gun.

CHAPTER V.

THE LAW FALLS IN CARSON.

THE Kid was cold with deep, biting rage, and half of it was for himself for losing that note. He'd felt the crackle of it in his pocket just before he'd made his play from that saloon at the gallows place. It was probably there that he'd lost it. He was disgusted with Hopple the sheriff for his stupidity, too. The Caspar John Law simply couldn't believe anybody would dare kidnap the judge.

Down below, Hopple, with his leg bound up, was hobbling around and

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roaring orders. The disappointed hanging mob had been dispersed and the sheriff was forestalling any chance of the crowd trying to pull a lynching party of its own. He ordered his deputies and specially sworn hands to circulate through the town, watching the bars especially. When any wind-bellied gent got ornery and began suggesting to the citizens to take the law into their own hands, they were to march him down to the jail pronto where he'd be held overnight.

"I'm the law in this town, an' thar's goin' to be law an' order aplenty!" Hopple swore.

Solo lighted a fresh quirly; he had to admire the sheriff's savvy despite his own anger. The gent sure knew how to rod a bunch that was itching for triggers like this one was. The Kid inspected his cell, bare but for a sagging cot and an old horse blanket. The only window was high up in the wall, and faced the crooked street and the main corners. Those latter were crowded now with surly, arguing townsmen.

By pulling himself up by the sound iron bars, deeply embedded in the double-thick dobe wall, the Kid got a glimpse of what was below. There was a charred crate, just the dirt cellar and blackened timbers that a fire had left of a building that had been smack against the side of the jail. There was no chance of escape there. It was more than thirty feet down.

He heard a faint tapping on metal. Going to the front of the cell, and putting his ear close to the slot of the solid iron door, he realized it came from the door of the cell beside his. Solo called back in a low voice.

"Listen, pardner," came the thin, hard voice of the doomed man, Mel Marsh. "Are you a gent sent by Boylan, a stranger to fool 'em?"

Solo answered in a soft pur. "Like fun I am, amigo!"

He heard the man walk away, groaning. "Then they'll hang me to-morrow shore as blazes, even if Boylan has got the judge!"

The afternoon dragged on. Flies droned in the hot cell. There was a burst of shooting down at a barroom and an ornery cowhand came flying through the batwing doors. Solo dozed for a while but woke when dusk began to shut down.

Impatiently, he rose and paced his cell. Finally, after much calling, a deputy came upstairs. The Kid wanted to know how long it would take them to get a rider out to Judge Trevan's place and back. The deputy smirked.

"He'll be back in time for yuh to git hung with the other polecat to-morrow, most likely, when he brings word the judge is home!"

Solo spent a couple of hours watching from the window. The town was roaring, pianos jangling from the dance halls, men cursing and shouting in the barrooms, guns popping spasmodically. The jail floor shook as new arrivals were herded unceremoniously in as the night grew older. Solo found his fingers at that skull again.

"They's a certain polecat a-hidin' in his hole in this setup," he told himself, thinking of Old Miley. Still, the humpback might be just a locoed fool.

It was Old Miley who brought him his dinner, opening the slot in the door and shoving it through while he stood outside with a six-gun cocked in his wavering hand.

"Hawg-lip an' cackle-berries," he wheezed as Solo ate. "This yere jail ain't so bad! An' I'm a-runnin' her all by myself now. Ever' last depity's out patrollin' the streets! Yes siree."

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He went on chattering as the hungry Kid chowed. Solo edged up to the panel in the iron door, wondering if he might discover some way to make a play and get into action. But Old Miley, for all his gabbing, stood back in the darkness against the far wall. He'd left his lantern down at the head of the corridor, but his drawn Colt barrel gleamed dully.

"Don't be so tight-lipped, feller," Old Miley went on. "Me, I likes to make friends with the gents here. Ain't got a real pardner ner a relative ner a——"

He broke off that stream of talk as if his jaw had been locked. Then he gabbled on about how the whole town was as proddy as an old mossback over the postponement of the hanging.

The Kid had to muscle his jaw up hard to keep from telling the old man he was a double-crossing liar. But Solo had decided the time had come to play his cards close to his chest. Old Miley went away at last, angrily demanding the Kid's tin plate before he was finished, as if he'd received a sudden summons.

A little later, a deputy was opening Solo's cell door. As he stepped through, the Kid thought he was dreaming. The deputy wore a sheepish look and extended the Kid's gun belts with the silver-stocked smokepoles. Solo strapped them on, then drew and found the guns loaded.—

Downstairs, Hopple was waiting, seated behind a table, his wounded leg propped up stiffly in front of him. He blinked at the Kid from back of shaggy eyebrows, and pursed his lips.

"You were right, Kid." He shoved a piece of paper over the desk. "Found it tacked to the door o' my place after dinner."

The Kid picked it up. It was another note from the Boylan Bunch, printed roughly like the one he'd found on his own shirt out on the range:

> See you didnt hang Marsh to-day. You was showing sense. Be waiting with him out at Three Buttes on the east road at dawn to-morra an' youll git word where to bring him to exchange him for the judge.

Solo smiled faintly. It proved he hadn't been pulling a windy about the note he'd claimed to have lost. But when he looked up at the sheriff's face, he was surprised. It was a mask of defeat, a picture of a grim, relentless man, whipped.

Old Miley came plodding out of the corridor that led to the second-floor stairs in the rear, smiling foolishly as he explained that he'd fed all the prisoners and was now going back to his bar job. Solo watched his bobbing head as he threaded his way across the street and disappeared through the doors under a kerosene flare that flickered on a sign saying: "Caspar Saloon."

Then Hopple spoke. "No, I was only runnin' a bluff before. I cain't string up Marsh if I want to! Judge Trevan—well, with him dead, there wouldn't be no kind o' law here!"

Kneading his thinning hair wearily with his big fists, he told about the judge. How he'd earned that name of "Four-square." How when he charged a jury that was wavering, they listened to him and obeyed him. Everybody knew the judge wasn't afeared of a thing, that nothing could make him advise an unfair or dishonest decision.

"Why, I've even know lobos to nod in agreement when the judge told 'em they was guilty an' was going to stretch rope!" Hopple ended. "This is a town ripe fer goin' bad on ten-seconds' notice. If it weren't

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fer the judge an' what he stands fer, it would!"

He pushed himself erect on his one good leg and waved to a deputy. Solo felt sorry for this grim old warrior of the law then. The man hated to have his law surrender to anybody.

"Bring the prisoner down now. We'll head fer Three Buttes! It'll be easier to git him out now with all the ruckus goin' on then in the mornin'. Go ahead."

CHAPTER VI.

MEAT FOR THE MOB.

IT was silent in there but for the scratching of a match on a gent's pants. The uproar outside continued. A buckboard overturned in front of one of the gambling halls. Through the open door, Solo could see the squealing horses rearing as a man tried to hold them. Then the hoarse voice of the deputy, who had returned unnoticed, scratched on the jail office.

"Marsh—he—he's gone," husked the deputy. He told how the cell window bars had been pried loose.

There was a stampede for the back stairs. Only Solo and the sheriff with his injured leg remained. The latter, sweat pimpling his suddenly ashen face, half hopped to the big front door and slammed and barred it. And Solo himself had no desire to go up for a look at that cell. He was putting two and two together fast, his hands brushing his silver gun butts.

He remembered how he had watched the street from his own window since darkness had fallen. If a gent had gone down from the other window, he couldn't have missed it. And he thought of what he'd land in, in full sight of the road, a spot into which no horse could be moved for a quick get-away.

The deputies came back, their faces stiff. One of them described the pried bars. Nobody seemed to know how it could have happened. Hopple looked toward the Kid, but the latter looked sleepier than ever. He was thinking how Old Miley, rodding the jail house alone, had stood talking to him while he chowed.

"This can't get out," Hopple said to his men, "er this whole shebang of a town'll go haywire! Slip out quietly. We've had them vigilantes outside watchin' the town fer hours lest the Boylan gang tried a raid. Marsh couldn't git far! No gent could, without bein' seen! Go out an' spread the word, an' watch! An' keep it quiet! Sabe?"

One after another, they slipped through the door as off-handedly as they could. The Kid was still trying to figure things out. He sensed that there were hide-out cards somewhere in this deck, that somebody was burning them off the bottom.

Hopple drew a bottle from the table drawer and splashed some liquor in a tin mug. He cursed with something like a sob.

"This finishes me. An' it's Rey's work again!" he said.

"Rey?" Solo remembered the long man in quiet gray, the gent who'd toted no gun irons, who'd talked to Old Miley.

Hopple nodded wearily. "He's a crook, all the way through. An' somehow he's worked this, like he's worked plenty o' things afore!"

The Kid slid his hat over the lump on his forehead. "If yore depities are afeared to bring him in——" he started.

Hopple snorted. "Bring him in? Fer what? On what charges? Thet's the way thet snake allus works! Don't even tote no hawglegs. Cain't hang nothin' on him. He don't be-

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lieve in killin'! Says it makes too much noise!"

The Kid bestrode a chair, itching with impatience to get into action, but seeking the trail sign first. With a few prodding questions, he learned that Rey was the wealthy owner of a store, a livery stable, a gambling hall, and the biggest barroom in the town. And he wanted that town rodded without too much law interfering with his profits.

"How can he figure to do thet?" Solo asked. "Gun hands?"

Hopple shook his head bitterly. "Rey don't have no band. But he has his hand in plenty o' things, an' on plenty o' hombres! It ain't supposed to be known he owns the restaurant. An' I hear the Caspar Saloon across the street is really his, too."

Solo tensed in the chair. "But he don't believe in killin'."

Hopple shook his head again and took another slug of the redeye, cursing himself because his wounded leg prevented his riding on the trail of the escaped man.

"Nope, he swears agin' it! When one o' his own housemen salivated a gambler who'd gone loco, Rey knocked out the houseman with a bung-starter an' brought him smack down here to the jail!"

A glass pane tinkled across the street as a thrown bottle smashed through it. Solo rubbed the skull beneath his chin. He wondered if the omen of that instinctive gesture, a sure-fire sign of trouble mighty soon, was failing this time.

"That's how come it to happen him an' Sil Boylan clashed," Hopple added. "Boylan's a killer—pure, dead, an' ugly! It's in his blood, like some gents drinkin'! He's raided Rey's place an' killed his crooked gamblers twice."

Solo was more mystified than ever. "Then why'd Rey want to see Marsh, the ace gun passer of the Boylan Bunch, escape?" he asked.

Hopple let out a breath wearily. "He heard yuh say the judge had been kidnaped."

With a start, Solo recalled how Rey had addressed him by name, as the "Silver Kid," without hearing it mentioned. Rey had recognized him, had evidently know him for what he was better than the others.

"Then it was the perfect layout fer him," the sheriff went on. "If we cain't produce Marsh, the Boylan Bunch'll string up the judge. That means the end o' law here, which is what Rey wants!"

The Kid hit his feet. Boot steps with a determined, sober, purposeful sound, had halted just outside the jail door anyway. "An' Rey has Marsh, the gun ace, now, eh? He kin kill him off?"

Hopple shook his head. "Rey don't. He gits 'em out. Sometimes he buys 'em off. An' he's got a trick of framin' a gent fer some crime if he don't know enough of his past to turn him in some place. He——"

A heavy fist smote the big planks of the door. Some sixth sense warned Solo to back-track silently into the darkness of the corridor, hands on his holster tops. Hopple saw him go, then limped to the door.

There was a handful of men out there, but they weren't the bleary-eyed revelers of the town. They were middle-aged, solemn-eyed men, coldly grim.

"Sheriff, we don't aim to start no trouble. We don't want to see this town busted wide open an'——" the leader began.

"Spit it out!" Hopple crackled.

The other scowled. "All right, sheriff. Word slipped out an' we

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kept it to ourselves to keep things quiet! We know Marsh got away."

Hopple swayed. "Who said so?"

"Never mind!" The leader tugged at the .45 butt on his hip. "We just want one thing! Let us have——"

A man in the back pushed forward, dragging a curled black-snake whip on his arm. "Let us have that Silver polecat what busted up the hangin' to-day, an' we'll find who got Marsh loose an' where he is!"

"I got a note that proves the Silver Kid is——" Hopple began.

One of the men stuck a cocked Colt in the sheriff's body. "We don't crave no writin'. Give us the Kid er——"

Solo only heard angry sounds, muffled words as he moved swiftly to the rear of the jail while the sheriff stalled them. He'd seen the door in the back there before. He held his breath as the key grated in the rusty latch. Then he was out into the night, gliding toward the horse shed behind which the sheriff had said they'd put his paint.

Sorghum nickered as his master drew close. With a match, the Kid located his saddle on a saddle peg and swung it aboard the pony. He meant to find that Rey snake.

The unmistakable bore of a gun iron snapped firmly into the Kid's spine. "I been waitin' fer you to come out, Mr. Silver Kid!"

It was the heavy, anger-torn voice of Little Jack, the man who bore the Kid's bullet brand.

CHAPTER VII.

TRAILING A COFFIN.

THE Kid was frozen in his tracks as Little Jack ground out words. He'd been pulling stakes, going down the trail that day, when he'd met up with Sil Boylan. And Little Jack had turned back because he thought his one-time saddle pard, Marsh, might live.

"But they're goin' to string him up to-morrow 'spite the judge!" Jack said in a half-hysterical whisper.

"I saved Marsh's neck to-day," Solo reminded him.

Little Jack spat. "And you're a-goin' to save it ag'in," he vowed. "'Cause I was waitin' fer the time you'd come out, knowin' yuh would! But yuh ain't free now; yo're my prisoner."

Solo broke in. He heard heavy footsteps in the jail, the flat sound of a fist striking flesh and bone. Hopple couldn't hold that townsman's committee with the snake-whip much longer. "Wait, amigo! Why kill me 'cause——"

The click of Little Jack's big teeth was plain behind Solo's neck. "I won't unless I have to! Mel Marsh packed more nerve'n any other man in the world! He was brave as blazes! He—— Well, I'm a-goin' to hold you as hostage—like the Boylan's got the judge!"

As he hurled the words, choking down the sound, his breath, heavy with whisky fumes, blew past the Kid. Solo understood. It was the old story of cow-range friendship and a younker who'd gone loco and poured down some Dutch courage to back it up.

"If they hang Mel, you die, too! I'll send 'em word so they'll know!"

The Kid knew he had to work fast. "Rey——" he started.

"I saw Rey ridin' out o' town about sundown!"

The Kid caught his breath. Rey had given himself a perfect alibi. "Your pard, Mel Marsh, ain't in that jail," he said calmly.

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Little Jack started. "He——"

The Kid followed it up like a blow. "He's in Rey's hands now—I'm plumb certain."

The big Little Jack behind him started, the spur of his boot heel grinding ground. And Solo had whipped around with an elbow as he whirled, batting the six-gun from the other's grip. Solo went for his own holsters.

"Rey hates any of Boylan's hands like poison!" Little Jack said, still stunned. "He'll—— Mebbe yo're lyin'!"

The Kid had already realized he'd need some gent to work with him. With cold courage that would have left a plunging cardman breathless, the Kid slid his weapons back into their sheaths.

"Pick up your hogleg, amigo." Then as Little Jack stood staring, he added. "Mebbe I kin git yore pard out o' his hands with yore help! An' remember—I don't aim to see the judge cash his chips either!"

Little Jack scooped up his gun, then stood a long moment in the dusk. Next, he stuck out a huge paw.

The impatient Kid was already leading his pony out. Little Jack drew his from the shadow of an eucalyptus tree bole. Farther down the line, they forked out of an alley and into the road. The town had begun to quiet down, but the pair were overlooked as folks gathered around the night stage that had drawn in before the town's most ornate barroom.

Solo pointed down to where the single kerosene flare of the Caspar Saloon guttered in the wind. "Drift in there offhandlike, pard. Then keep yore eyes peeled. Old Miley is the one thet kin give us the tip-off. Marsh couldn't get out o' this town. Miley mebbe knows where he is."

The Kid was playing a strong hunch. He told Little Jack to meet him on the flat land behind the saloon when he learned something. Then the Kid worked his rested paint horse around through a gap in the street front and out past some shacks till he got behind a low rise. After that, he waited.

Once again that day, the time crept slowly. The Kid squeezed out another quirly coal and wondered if Jack had gotten too strong on more redeye.

Out in the glare of the road, he saw them loading up the coach that seemed to be delayed in getting away. The mule-skinner was waving his whip and swearing and exhorting as men strained in the rear. Then a long, rectangular box was shoved onto the baggage rack. One of the saloon doors opened, throwing out light. The Kid saw that the box was a coffin being lashed into position. A couple of minutes later, the stage pulled out.

Impatiently, the Kid started forward to see what had happened to Little Jack. He got halfway to the rear of the place when he saw a hulk move cautiously from behind a brush clump, peering around. Solo whistled softly. Stupidly Little Jack hailed him loudly and ran forward.

"Nothin' I seen er heard," he said. "I slipped out the back way 'cause I knew you'd be wonderin'! Old Miley is in there like allus. Only to-night he's settin' up free drinks."

Solo pushed a gun back into its holster disappointedly. "Free drinks, huh? What fer?"

Jack chuckled. "Says he's celebratin' 'cause he was able to afford

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to send a coffin off by the stage fer his brother who died down the line somewheres."

Solo steeled. He looked at the spot where that stage had stood with the coffin on its top. And he remembered how Old Miley, when talking to him in the jail at grub time, had said he didn't have a relative in the world.

"Little Jack, yore pard, Marsh, was shipped out in that coffin by Rey's orders. Yep, he's alive I reckon, but——" His hands went to the skull. "Where's thet stage a-headin'?" He saw now how Rey meant to get his prisoner through the tight lines of the law.

Little Jack babbled on excitedly. The stage went across the ridge to an old mining town where the lode had run out. But in the boom days, the railroad had put a spur through there where they still stopped to pick up freight.

"We're headin' off that stage," the Kid started to explain. Then he saw a shadow stir behind Jack's big frame.

A gun hammer clicked. "What do you gents want here'bouts?" came a coarse voice. Because he'd left by the back door, Little Jack had drawn suspicion.

The Kid flicked steel-fingered hands for his silver butts, but it was in vain. Bolting like a startled horse, Little Jack never even looked behind. With gun half drawn, he stampeded right through the half-pint Kid, bowling Solo flat. A gun muzzle flare stabbed the dark. The Kid tried to rise to his knees as Jack's howl carried back to him.

He saw the dim outline of straggle-legged Miley's shape bearing toward him. And the Kid realized his prized silver-stocked weapons had been battered from his grasp. Solo flattened, apparently trapped. Then a running hombre came up from one side, yelling as he crossed Old Miley's path. The man was suddenly in the humpback's grasp. Then he was knocked off his feet, and Old Miley came on after Little Jack, whom he saw fleeing.

The Kid flattened in the grass and Miley went by him. Solo drew a breath as he tried to find his weapons. He came upon a wash hole and crept into it, wondering how long he'd live. They were calling out all around him. One gent came upon his horse. Old Miley found one of the silver-stocked guns, and he sucked his breath with a loud hiss as he raised it and recognized it.

The minutes crept by. Then the hunchback sang out:

"Keep a-scourin' the whole flats! Thar was two of 'em! I got a ride ter make." And he moved off into the night.

The moon had started to poke through in the north. And it was more than an hour later before the Kid heard the saloon's back door slam on the last man. Then he crept out, cursing as he stalked toward the street. His foot hit metal; it was one of his beloved and deadly weapons.

Seizing it, the Kid raced for the street. Selecting a powerful-looking bay at a crowded hitch rail, he hit the saddle, swung it out, and high-tailed it around the corner. Out beyond the garish lights, he was halted by one of the vigilante guards, but there was a deputy with him who recognized the Kid and allowed him to pass.

"Where yuh headin', Kid?"

"To keep a plumb important engagement, amigo, with a piece of Boot Hill furniture!" he called back.

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CHAPTER VIII.

SHOOT-OUT AND SHOW-DOWN.

THE bay was a lazy animal. Solo had to keep urging it on with his dull-roweled spurs. He went around the deep-cut curve in the road by which he'd entered Caspar, then whipped the bay up some more with his sombrero.

He was trying to figure out how much of a start the coach as well as Old Miley had upon him. If it was a long trail, he had a chance to overhaul them. As he thought of the hulking Little Jack, he cursed between his teeth. Of two things he was certain. Old Miley had released Marsh from the jail. The bars had only been pried apart while Miley talked with the Kid to hid the hunchback's actions. The other thing the Kid knew was that at the end of that trail he'd meet up with Rey, the man who hated killing.

The lights of Caspar fell behind. A hot wind was whispering across the range. The trail became more broken as it went through a notch and sloped down gently. And the bay almost threw the Kid, accustomed to his own well-trained paint, as it tried to pull in when they neared a water hole.

"Pardner," the Kid warned the animal, "I got business ahead, plumb trigger-pressin' business!"

They were working through a stand of second-growth timber. The almost colorlessly pale moon sent down wan rays from a star-studded sky. Then the bay shied at an ominous shadow as they rounded a great, jutting elbow of rock. And Solo reined in sharply that time.

Below was the stage, pulled up at a tiny station platform beside a single pair of gleaming threads that were rails. The skinner and a passenger had shunted the coffin onto the high platform. It settled with a thump as Solo got his catlike eyes focused.

The Kid worked the horse gently down toward the tiny, almost abandoned settlement with its sagging roofs looking like cold, dead things under the moon. The stage pulled away with a grind of wheels. In a minute, it was through the deathlike town and had swung downhill around a great curve.

Dropping from the saddle, the Kid led the animal along. He approached the station from behind, and edged around the corner. It seemed as still as a tomb. Then the Kid's hand snaked across for a gun. He forgot the empty holsters as he spotted a slablike shadow moving down the platform. There was still time to draw from the other hip. Then the badly trained bay reared up behind him. Leaping clear, Solo was slammed against the edge of the station, stunned for a moment.

"Our prowling friend!" cried a soft voice that wheezed no longer. It was Old Miley.

He'd stepped from cover beneath the platform by the tracks. Like some grotesque cat he sprang at the still drawing Solo, fired once, and missed. He hurled himself on the slight-bodied Kid before the latter could quite get his leaping hand up to trigger. Solo felt as if he were being seized by some inhuman thing, felt himself borne down. They rolled on the station platform.

The Kid lashed out with the spur of a doubled-up leg. Old Miley tore free with a horrible cry from the agony in his bullet-cut arm. Solo backed to the wooden wall, getting his gun cocked. Then he saw the tall Rey sweeping at him from the side.

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Like a hailstorm out of the night, lead spattered and exploded into the side of the station in a veritable shower. All three were dumfounded. The Kid was the first to see the shadowy handful of men flowing from behind old shacks, and flinging themselves toward the station. He had a split-second picture of Sil Boylan's roan-red face under the moon. Then there was another hurricane of the leaden hornets.

There was no time to think. Solo and Old Miley were almost shoulder to shoulder, Old Miley with the Kid's missing gun in one of his horny hands. They stood triggering for their lives. It was a strange layout in which fate had dealt the cards.

The raiders wavered a moment, surprised at the storm of shells searing through the feeble moonlight at them. Then two riders came cutting out from one of the shacks, curveting the station from the other end of the platform. They closed in.

As he reloaded with deadly cool hands, Solo thought he saw an apparition on the platform. Rey had unhooked the lid of the coffin, and Mel Marsh, the doomed man he'd snaked from jail, was stepping out, armed. He drew back. Solo saw a silvery streak rise in the hand of Rey, who didn't like killing because it made too much noise. It was a knife.

The Kid cried out. Old Miley came flinging back against him, mortally wounded.

"Shoot, Marsh!" came Rey's voice, somehow cool through the uproar.

A horseman lunged across the tracks at them. Miley was still triggering. The Kid saw that that horseman was Little Jack. He screamed out when he saw his saddle pard facing him with leveled gun. The Kid understood then that Little Jack had ridden back to the Boylan Bunch with the information which Solo had given the outlaw. They, too, had stalked that coach with its strange coffin of the living.

There was one split second of silence. Solo saw that Little Jack was going to fire point-blank at Marsh, saw in a flash that Little Jack who'd worshiped his old pard for his nerve was really yellow himself. And the Kid's hot gun bucked twice in his hand.

Little Jack toppled from the saddle. And Rey slammed himself back against the station side, staring glassy-eyed at his falling knife, then to the livid red scar a slug had made across the back of his knife hand. A striding fury, Solo grabbed his second silver-stocked gun from the fallen Miley's hand, and sent both guns spitting. One man rushed right at him. It was Boylan himself. The Kid dived and fired once.

Boylan went down as if the earth had been kicked out from under him. It might as well have been; he was already dead. The Kid was standing there swaying in a maze of acrid powder smoke. He whipped his guns around to cover Rey, the man who hated to kill, and the still bewildered Mel Marsh. Boylan's scattered outlaws were already fleeing.

The outlaw leader had let his weapon fall. He stood shaking his head. "I'm agoin' to die anyways," he muttered. "But somehow I couldn't kill yuh after gittin' that knife out o' my back."

The Kid's eyes flickered to Rey, to that bullet-brand on his hand. Rey was icily cool.

"We kin fix these things," he said clearly. "I can pay——"

"Yuh'll pay on the end of a rope for rodding a jail break, mistuh. Men wearin' that bullet-brand o' mine

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like you are never keep Boot Hill waitin' long!"

He saw a specterlike rider advance stiffly from behind those shacks. It was the judge, Four-square Trevan, his arms bound in the saddle, coming from where his routed captors had left him. Solo grinned bleakly.

"This gent comin' now—he kin explain, I suspect."

The Silver Kid kin shore master shoot-outs, but then he's goin' tuh need tuh purty soon. Solo's about tuh buck another plenty salty bunch o' bandits in a story yuh'll shore want tuh be readin'. Watch fer it in Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly.

HASH KNIFE

THE TENDERFOOT'S BET

In their off time, when cowboys were not rolling quirlies, or talking rustlers or brands, they were generally bragging about their pet horses. Each man had his string, in which there was always a special favorite, and, as they were good fellows, they would stand for almost anything except to catch another puncher riding that particular pet.

One big outfit in New Mexico, the CA Bar, had about four hundred saddle horses, and the men knew every one by name, color, and disposition. If one happened to be missing, every one knew which one it was. Most of these horses, although like the men who rode them, had their good and bad points, were well trained, and were obedient to the slightest sign from their owners.

There was one rider who had an exceptionally clever cutting horse named Carnello. It was not great on looks to any one not knowing how to read sign on the appearance of a horse, but it had the reputation of being the best cutting horse in New Mexico.

One day, during a round-up in which many herds were mixed, a tenderfoot visitor appeared on the scene, and was much interested in the proceedings. Carnello's rider remarked to the visitor casually that his horse could read brands as well as any rider could. Also that he would cut cows from the herd without being "pointed." At the time, the punchers were cutting out cows of the CA Bar with unbranded calves for branding.

The tenderfoot wouldn't believe the statement without proof, and bet the cowboy five dollars that the horse could not do what he had boasted. The bet was taken, and the cowboy proceeded to prove his assertion. He straightway cut out three CA Bar cows, with unbranded calves, without apparently directing the horse in any way.

What he did was ride into the herd and, on sighting a cow with the CA Bar brand, give the horse the slightest touch with a spur on the side he wanted it to go, drop the reins, and the horse would make straight for the cow wanted, cutting her out of the herd with the unbranded young ones that were following her.

No one could see the movement, and only an experienced hand would notice the dropping of the reins. The tenderfoot was convinced that Carnello could read brands, and paid over his money willingly.

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Sawin' A Cowpoke In Half

By Frank J. Litchfield

Author of "So Yuh Cain't Cook, Eh?" etc.

PROBLY a lot of folks who read the Del Rio *Dot*, which is a weakly newspaper, think that me and "Bugeye" Martin are still in jail charged with burglarizin the bank of 1000 bucks U. S. money.

But such is not the case, on acct. of me and Bugeye, which is my pard, busted out of the jail just after the paper went to press. Also, a lot of other things have happened since then.

So Bugeye, who stutters when he is exsited, said to me: "J-J-Jeff," on acct. of I am Jefferson Hokit the 3rd, "you h-h-h-had b-b-better write

An hombre who tries tricks with Jeff an' Bugeye would stay healthier if he picked a couple o' bobcats.

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d-d-down what h-h-h-happened," Bugeye said. And by the time Bugeye was half through sayin this, I was about half through writin the true acct. of the robbery, and here it is.

In the 1st place, if it hadnt been for Bugeyes fool notions, there wouldnt have been no jail break in the 2nd place, on acct. of me and Bugeye wouldnt have been in jail in the 1st place to begin with, and I will tell you why.

Me and Bugeye are cowboy detectives, but he aint never plumb satisfied with goin a round solvin murder mysteries and catchin criminuls. He is always wantin to be somethin else, and last week, Bugeye was studyin to be a slight-of-hand performer, a contorchionist, and a juggler in 16 easy lessons which was in a book that cost Bugeye 4 bits.

This might have been all right, but it didnt mix with Bugeye's part time job in "Old Man" Miller's feed store where he was sackin oats in them big 5 bushel sacks, on acct. of he tried a couple of his tricks on Old Man Miller.

1st, Bugeye borried Old Man Miller's Stetson and told him to watch close on acct. of the hand is quicker than the eye, and then Bugeye put the Stetson on a feed box and busted a couple of eggs in it and covered it with his bandanna whilst he made a couple of hokus-pokus passes over it.

Bugeye told me there was supposed to be a rabbit in the hat when he took the cover off, but there wasnt. The rabbit was a wild jack which Bugeye had nearly run his horse almost to death before he could ketch it, and just as Bugeye yanked off the bandanna, the jack rabbit jumped out of Bugeyes sleeve and went tearin through the store, and so did Old Man Miller when he seen what was in his hat.

"You are fired quicker than the eye!" yelled Old Man Miller, and added some more that was mighty profane. "And what is more," he told Bugeye, "I am dockin you for the price of a new J. B. Now, get out of here," he hollered, "only not until you have finished sackin them oats!"

Well, it seams like Bugeye is always gettin fired, so this didnt bother him none a-tall. About 5 minnits later along come Capt. Moore of the Rangers, and Bugeye borried his watch to do a trick.

"This 1 had better be good," I told Bugeye, as he hung the 17-jool watch on a nail.

But he said not to worry on acct. of he had a blank cartridge in his .45, and he covered the watch with the bandanna and stepped back 20 paces and cracked down at it. But I reckon the cartridge wasnt a blank, and I will tell you why.

It is because all of a suddint there was springs and wheels and pieces of

All of a suddint there was springs and wheels and pieces of watch case flyin 40 ways for Sunday.

watch case flyin 40 ways for Sunday, and Capt. Moore let out a whoop and yanked out his .45, but bein so

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mad made him slow on the draw and the 1st shot he fired missed Bugeyes boot heels as they disappeered out the door and by the time Capt. Moore had fired the 2nd shot, Bugeye was down acrost the railroad tracks and vanishin mitey rapid in the chaparral.

I told Capt. Moore that me and Bugeye would do detective work to pay for the watch, but he cussed in a profane tone of voice and said he wouldnt have us a round on a bet. So I went to look for Bugeye.

This turned out to be a bad move, and I will tell you why. It was on acct. of down by the railroad tracks there was a show company pitchin their tents and there was a big sign which read as follers, to wit:

SEE PROFESSOR ALADDIN'S
AMAZING MAGIC!
SAWING A WOMAN IN HALF
EACH AND EVERY NIGHT!

Bugeye read this and got hot under the collar. "Why, g-g-g-gosh, g-g-g-gee whiz!" Bugeye said. "I am not goin to set by idly whilst that Aladdin hombre saws a woman in half every night! I will b-b-bust up his s-s-show and p-p-put a s-s-slug in his m-m-m-mangy h-h-hide!" Bugeye said.

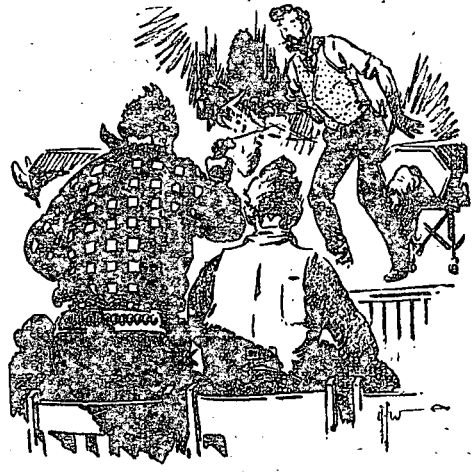
Well, I tried to tell Bugeye there must be some kind of trick to it, but you cant tell Bugeye nothin nohow. He said he would see for himself, and that is how come me and Bugeye was in the 3rd row at the show that night.

There was some other things on the program, includin a short hombre who called hisself "Limbo, the Rubber Man," and a juggler named "Wizardo," but Bugeye didnt pay much attention to Limbo tyin hisself in double half hitches, or Wizardo tossin 7 bottles in the air at 1 time. He just set on the edge of his seat and kept callin Professor Aladdin a skunk and a yellerbellied coyote and etc.

Finely the professor put on his act. He shoved a long box which looked like a coffin out on the stage and had a woman in tights lie down in it and stick her head out of 1 end and her feet out of the other 1. Then he let down the lid and covered the box for a minnit with a cloth like Bugeye covered Old Man Miller's Stetson.

"I have now put the yung lady in a state of suspenders animation," said the professor, who was a tall hombre with a beard and a pointed mustash. "The audience will kindly remane quiet," he said, and then he made a couple of passes over the box and started in to saw.

Well, Bugeye didnt remane quiet very long. When the saw bit down through the box where the yung lady



Bugeye ups and cracks down with his .45.

was, the professor turned around and shoved 1 end of the box, which contaned her feet, half way acrost the stage. And then Bugeye busted loose.

"H-h-h-hay!" he hollered. "You

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cant do t-t-that, you mangy c-c-c-coyote!"

At this, the perfessor made a move like he was goin to draw a gun, but he wasnt goin to draw nothin but a bandanna from his pants pocket. Bugeye dident no this, how ever, and he ups and cracks down with his .45.

Well, it was a good thing Bugeye had that blank cartridge in his .45 or he would have been charged with murder. But as it was, nothin happened exsept Capt. Moore of the Rangers jumped up from his seat 2 rows back and dragged Bugeye out the front door of the tent and kicked him between the ticket stand and the popcorn wagon.

"You get out and stay out!" yelled Capt. Moore. "And if I see you again," he told Bugeye, "I will throw you in jail pronto and mitey suddint!"

Me and Bugeye went back to the feed store where we was sleepin, and when we went past the bank, which is next door, we thought we heard a noise. But we was feelin mighty low and not like doin no detective work, so we dident investigate, and I wish we had.

Because the next mornin Capt. Moore and the sheriff come into the feed store lookin mighty grim, and they examined some tracks in the dust and said shore enuff, the hombre who stole 1000 dollars from the bank had come that way, and Capt. Moore seen Bugeye sackin oats and hollered:

"That's the man, rite there!"

And with that he collered Bugeye and hawled him off to jail, takin me along as an exsessory before or after the fact, and when I ast him what fact he said to shut up.

Well, it wasent the 1st time me and Bugeye had been in jail, but it made us feel mitey blue to hear

He collered Bugeye and hawled him off to jail, takin me along as an exsessory.

the crowd down acrost the railroad track and smell popcorn and peanuts and especially Bugeye felt bad because he figgered another woman was bein sawed in half just so the professor could make a little dinero.

So we started tryin to figger ways and means of gettin out of there, but there wasent no way and the sheriff had went to the show or out of town, because he was not nowheres a round.

Finely Bugeye layed down on the cot and snored and I couldent sleep on acct. of the noise he made sounded like Professor Aladdin's saw, and I reckon it was a good thing I couldent, and I will tell you why.

It was because about midnite there was a show wagon pulled up close to the jail window and stopped there, and I seen our chanst to escape.

There was a reata hangin on a nail just outside our door, and there was a broom in the cell with which the sheriff had tried with out no success, to get Bugeye to sweep the floor. Reachin out with the broom handle, I got the reata, then I bilt a loop and woke up Bugeye.

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"I will rope 1 of them standards on the show wagon and tie the reata to 1 of these bars," I told Bugeye. "When the team starts up, I reckon we will be free men."

Well, Bugeye started stutterin so loud I finely had to clap my hand over his mouth for fear he would skeer the horses before we was ready. And then I throwed the loop by reachin through the window bars, and shore enuff, I caught 1 of the standards.

Then we had to set and wate, with every nerve on edge until somebody come along and clumb up to the drivers seat and we seen that it was the professor, on acct. of this bein a 1-horse show and him havin to do his own drivin.

"Giddap," the professor told his team.

The horses started out and there was a splinterin sound and the bar come loose and so did me and Bugeye, only we was in a bigger hurry

There was a splinterin sound and the bar come loose and so did me and Bugeye.

than the bar on acct. of we heard horses comin and knew the sheriff was on his way back.

Well, we ducked down a side street and cut over by the bank and went in the feed store on acct. of our guns was there. Whilst we was gettin ready to shake the dust of Del Rio from our boots forever more, we heard what sounded like rats in an old chimney which comes from the bank building into the feed store.

"Them rats are after Old Man Miller's feed again," I told Bugeye. "Whilst Old Man Miller has fired you at least 6 times, he is not a bad hombre. Tie a sack over that flue and keep them out of here," I told Bugeye.

The which he done whilst I was writin a note to the sheriff to tell him we would be back after we had caught the real criminul and cleared our names for posteriority. Then me and Bugeye snuck out the door and a round the back way towards the corral where we kept our horses.

But before we got there we seen that show wagon roll up and stop behind the building, and Bugeye nudged me with his elbow and pulled me in the shade next to the building where there was no moonlite.

"T-t-t-that b-b-b-buzzard is the c-c-cause of all this," Bugeye said. "F-f-further more he ain't g-g-g-got no right to be g-g-g-goin a round s-s-s-sawin women in half. Lets j-j-jump him," Bugeye told me.

Well, I got my detective badge ready and so did Bugeye, and just as the professor started to clime off of his wagon, we busted out and shoved our .45s at him.

"You are under arrest in the name of the law," I told him calm like, whilst Bugeye was tryin to say the same thing and gettin nowhere. "Stick up yore hands," I said sternly.

The professor was plumb skeered. "I aint done nothin, officers," he said, lookin around fearful like.

"N-n-nothin exsept s-s-s-saw a w-w-w-woman in 2 parts each and every n-n-night!" Bugeye told him.

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Well, the professor kinda laffed at this. "That is just a slight-of-hand trick," he explaned. "The woman is not sawed in half at all. You have not got nothin on me," he told us.

It kinda looked like he was right and a good detective cant go around makin arrests under false pretenses. But Bugeye jammed his .45 in the professors ribs and told him he would have to prove that statement.

"I am a s-s-s-slight of h-h-h—— I am a m-m-m-magician myself!" Bugeye said. "You will h-h-h-have t- s-s-show me. If it is a t-t-t-trick, I will let you s-s-s-saw me in half to p-p-prove it."

Just then there was a shot out of the dark, and a bullet come whizzin past me and Bugeye and like a flash we whirled around and pumped a couple of shots at the spurt of powder flame and somebody yelled in pane.

I kept my gun on the professor, whilst Bugeye run over to the corner of the building, and there was this jugglin hombre who called hisself "Wizardo," and he was tossin his 6 gun in the air like it was mighty hot. The which it was, on acct. of I of our bullets had hit the barrel and spattered on his hand.

"You also are under arrest," I told Wizardo. "Come over here with yore pard," I told him, not knowin what me and Bugeye would do with them on acct. of we was wanted men and jail-breakers ourselfs.

"Look," said the professor. "If you will let us go, I will show you how I saw people in half. Wizardo can help me move the box to the back end of the wagon, and yore friend who is a slight-of-hand performer can be the 1 I saw. How about it?" ast the professor.

"I—I d-d-d-dont know," Bugeye said, but the professor sneered and ast him if he was afrade.

There is not no detective worthy of the name who is afrade, so I said heck no, he wasent afrade. "Get in the box, Bugeye," I told him.

Well, Bugeye clumb into the box which they set in the end gate of the wagon, and it give me a mighty queer feelin in my stummick to see him lay down with his head stickin out of one end and his feet out of the other.

But I reckon that is not nothin to the way Bugeye felt hisself when the professor kinda swung the box a round, let the lid down, and covered it up for a minnit, whilst he made some passes over it and said he was putting Bugeye into a state of suspenders animation.

When he said this, Bugeye hollered out from under the tarp that was over the box, and he was plenty exsited. "H-h-h-hay!" yelled Bugeye. "T-t-t-that aint so, on acct. I can still f-f-f-feel, and——"

"You won't feel a thing," the professor said, like he was kinda mad, and then he jerked off the tarp and started to saw.

Well, I was watchin and holdin my gun on the professor just in case he tried to start somethin, and it was a kind of a shock to see that saw bite down to where the middle of Bugeye ought to have been.

"How do you feel, Bugeye?" I ast him.

He looked kinda pale a round his gills. "I c-c-c-cant feel n-n-nothin from the waste down!" he told me.

And just then the saw went all the way on through the box with a screechy noise and Professor Aladdin grinned and yanked the end of the box that contained Bugeyes head around so Bugeye could look at the end of the box that contaned his feet, and it shore give me a funny feelin to see Bugeye do that. As for Bug-

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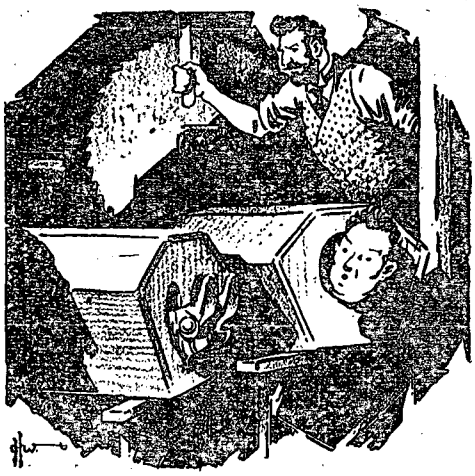
eye, his hair rose up on his head like a broomtails mane.

"G-g-g-gosh!" stuttered Bugeye. "Im in 2 p-p-p-parts, s-s-shore



Bugeyes hair rose up on his head like a broomtails mane.

enuff!" Then he started hollerin. "Jeff! J-J-J-Jeff! G-g-g-get me out of h-h-h-here!"

Well, it seams like the professor must of heard somebody or seen them comin, because all of a suddint he made a grab for my gun and yanked it out of my hand, and he was mighty mad.

"I will put an end to yore sufferin!" the professor growled, and he layed the gun barrel down hard on Bugeyes 1st part, which was his head.

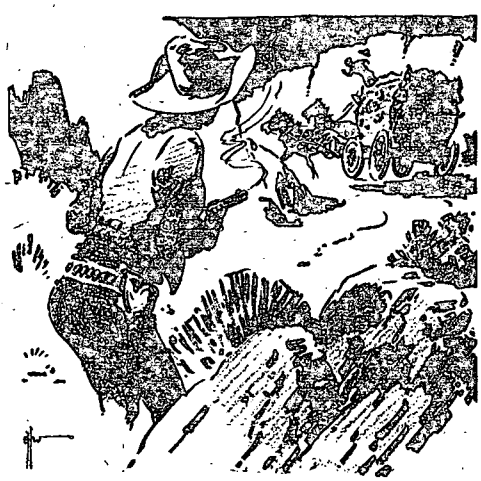
I hollered "Hey, you cant do my pard like that!" and hawled off and hit the professor so hard it nocked him off the ground and into the wagon and just then guns started bangin from the corner of the feed store and the bank, and the professors team felt some gravel kick up and sting them.

Well, from that time on things happened so fast I couldnt keep up with them at all. But the 1st thing I seen was my gun bounce out of the professors hand and the next thing I seen was the top half of Bugeye bounce out of the wagon, on acct. of the team was runnin away.

Bang-bang! went some more guns and I heard the sheriff yell: "Hey! There are the skunks, now, the mangy jail-breakers!" and I knew he was rong on acct. of there was onley 1 and a half of us and it was up to me to stop the runaway horses that was separatin Bugeye farther every minnit.

So I grabbed my gun and hollered for the professor to stop, but he didnt pay no attention, so I slammed a couple of shots after him and I seen him pitch out of the wagon just as it run into the draw, which had considerable water in it.

Then I seen the sheriff and Capt. Moore was high-tailin it after the wagon, thinkin me and Bugeye was in it, so I layed low for a minnit. An' then Bugeye let out a moan.



I slammed a couple of shots after him and I seen him pitch out of the wagon.

"I cant feel nothin from the waste down!" said Bugeye, forgettin to stutter on acct. of that nock on the head.

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It was purty hard to tell Bugeye the truth, but he guessed it and hollered for a gun on acct. of his own was in the box with him. I was feelin kind of sorry for Bugeye who looked just like half of his former self, so I let him have my gun and he layed in the box and took another shot down toward the draw, and there was a yell from somebody ridin back our way.

This turned out to be Capt. Moore, and Bugeye had parted his hair with a bullet which made Capt. Moore mitey sore.

"So we have caught you, eh?" hollered Capt. Moore. "You will try and hide in that box, eh? Well, come out of there pronto," Capt. Moore said, "or they will have to bury you in the box!"

I reckon he would have done it, too, on acct. of Bugeye couldnt get out by hisself. But the sheriff come up about that time hawlin a wounded hombre on his horse, and it was Professor Aladdin. And the sheriff was so sore he up and kicked the box a whack and nocked a slat off it.

When he done this, I was just about to make a bust for liberty so I could rescue Bugeyes legs from floatin down the draw. But I took 1 look at the box and seen that this wouldent be nesessary.

Bugeye was all in 1 peace, but he was doubled in the box in such a contorchionist style that he couldent feel nothin from the waste down. And his boots was gone.

Well, Bugeye got out just in time to see one of the sheriffs men come back up the hill with this hombre who called hisself Wizardo, which was wearin Bugeyes boots. And it seems that Wizardo was the lower half of what I thought was Bugeye, all the time, him bein doubled up in the lower half of the box.

Professor Aladdin started moanin somethin about he didnt know nothin about the bank robbery, the which made the sheriff and Capt. Moore raise up there ears and lissen. Then we heard a hollerin and a scramblin noise inside the feed store and the sheriff yelled:

"What is that?"

I had a hunch, and I told him. "We have caught a rat."

And when the officers marched us around to the front of the store, and me and Bugeye opened it up, we found that contorchionist hombre which called hisself "Limbo, the Rubber Man," hangin in that oat sack which I had Bugeye put over the old chimney flue. And he was fightin and hollerin like all get out, so the sheriff cut him down, and we found some more of the bank money in his pockets.

It was on acct. of him bein a contorchionist that he was able to crawl down the bank chimney and out through the old flue in the feed store like a centipede, and it was him which had robbed the bank before.

There was money on Professor Aladdin and Wizardo, too, which landed them in jail as excessorys both before and after the fact.

The only thing me and Bugeye are still wonderin about is how the professor done that trick so slick. But Bugeye says he dont care none, on acct. of he is mitey glad he is in 1 peace and he has give up his idea of bein' a slight-of-hand performer, because Old Man Miller said he would forget some of his fool ideas.

But there is not no tellin what Bugeye will figger out next.

Thet shore is the truth, but yuh kin bet yore last peso thet whatever Bugeye does think up next will land him an' his pard in another mess o' trouble. Watch fer another Jeff an' Bugeye story in an early issue o' Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly.

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A RED-HEADED INDIAN

Troops had been sent from Fort Mason, Texas, to the Canadian River to punish Indians for their raids on white settlements. Forty friendly Tonkawaw Indians were numbered among the men, under the command of Captain Sul Ross, and the whole force was commanded by General van Dorn.

Scouts were sent ahead to locate the Indians' stronghold, and when this was done, the troops had to travel all night in order to surprise the enemy in the morning. They were making camp late in the afternoon, when the scouts came racing in yelling: "Indians! Indians! The Indians are upon us!"

Soon the Indians charged in great force, and a fierce battle followed. While the fighting was still going on, a man dressed as an Indian advanced and surrendered. He had blue eyes and flaming red hair. He knew no English but could speak a little Spanish.

In the command was a red-headed Irishman named Terry Griffin. After the battle Terry, who was the wit of the company, was placed as guard over the prisoner. His remarks about the Indian's red head, and his Irish face, exasperated the "Indian" to the point of fury.

Finally, he broke loose with a volume of Irish invective in the Tipperary brogue that stopped the astounded Terry's tongue. But after a short pause, the sergeant had to use all his most forceful persuasion to keep Terry from shooting his countryman then and there. The man was handed over to the Tonks for safe-keeping.

The next morning, while on the march, the command caught up with an emigrant train. The news spread that a red-headed Irishman, posing as an Indian, had been captured, and every one in the train wanted to see him. As they resumed the march, a white-haired old man hurried toward General van Dorn. Holding out a small bag, he said: "General, this is all the money I have in the world, and I will give it to you if you will turn that scoundrel over to me."

The general replied that he had to protect his prisoner, and that all the money in the world could not buy his consent to such an act. Then the disappointed old man told a group of soldiers that, when he was living near Castroville some years before, he had befriended that man, and had given him a home and employment. When he returned one evening after a three days' round-up, he found that his entire family had been murdered, and the red-headed man had vanished. Later he learned that the murderer had found a welcome with the Comanches, and had lived with them since.

When the march was resumed, it was found that the Tonks of Captain Sul Ross had disappeared to a man. The desertion of the Tonkawaws was a puzzle to every one, and the captain was laughed at unmercifully about the loss of his command.

But that evening the mystery was cleared up. As the troops went into camp, a commotion was heard in the direction from which they had just come. In a few moments the Tonkawaws charged forward with blood-curdling yells, and bearing on a pole the flaming red head of the captured Irish "Indian."

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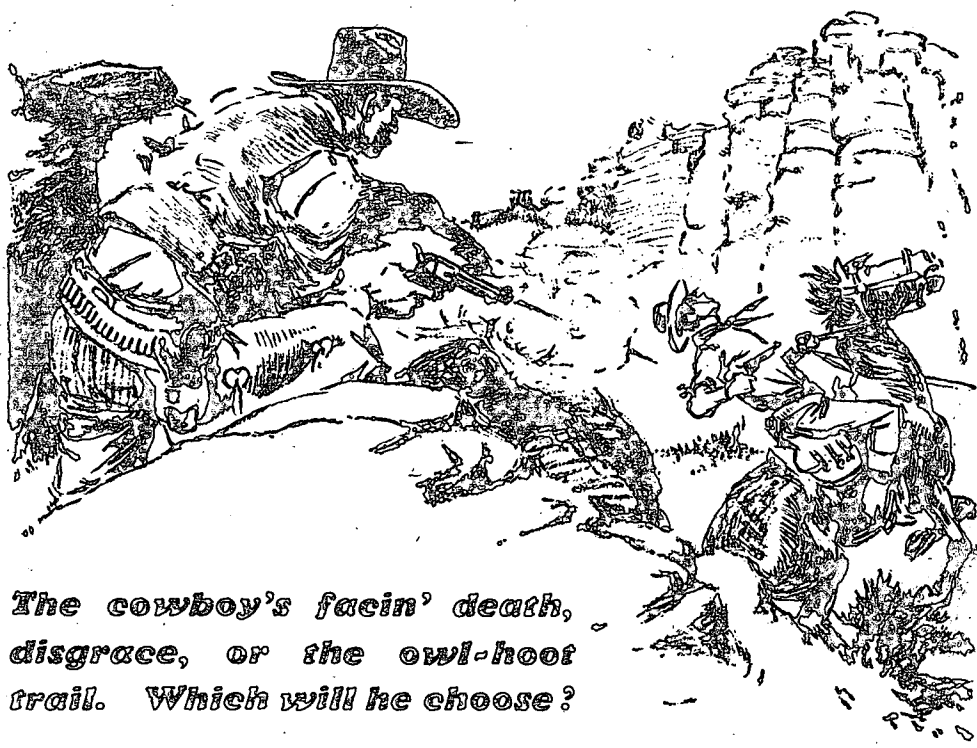
Death Stalks The Pay Roll

By Carl Raht

Author of "A Pard for a Fightin' Kid," etc.



The cowboy's facin' death, disgrace, or the owl-hoot trail. Which will he choose?

LES KENNEY heaved a sigh of relief as he swung stiffly from the blue roan's back in front of the general office of the Right Spot Mining Company and untied the saddlebags containing the mine's five-thousand-dollar pay roll. He paused to slap the alkali dust from his worn blue Levis; then, with the saddlebags slung over an arm, he marched into the office.

Hane McBride, mine superintendent, looked up smiling. "I see yuh've made it ag'in, Kenney," he said, gray eyes crinkling at the dusty, tired pay-roll messenger.

"Yes, I made it ag'in," stated Les, with something of a grim look around his wide mouth.

How could the super know what this riding in twice a month with that sum of money meant to a cowboy struggling for a foothold? Especially a cowboy with a prison-stripe past. Les would like to have added that he'd keep on making it. But

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would he? For Les Kenney was finding the straight and narrow mighty hard going.

Then came the super's voice. "We've decided tuh boost yore pay, Kenney. Yo're the first man we've ever had who made us feel the pay roll was safe in his keeping."

The lanky, hard-bodied young cow-puncher's tan deepened and he shot the super a grateful glance. "Thanks, Hane, I kin use it," he said simply, and turned and walked out in the sunlight.

Leather creaked as he stepped into the stirrups, and his blue roan turned up the trail homeward.

He hadn't always had a home to turn to, only since he'd hooked up with "Sandy" Groves. Les's pay-roll job was helping stock their little 8 Bar spread, while Sandy was working mightily with the cattle. They'd ridden through troubles and dry spells together, but now the sun was beginning to shine for them.

Sandy would be waiting for him. Good old Sandy; as fine a partner as a man could have. He'd be tickled over the boost in pay, and Les loped easily along the trail with a whistled tune on his lips.

Somehow the shadowy menace that always dogged him when the pay-roll money was in the saddlebags now seemed dispelled, driven away in the relief he felt after he'd delivered the gold. And somehow the temptation itself was lessened every time he brought the pay roll in. Sandy, good old Sandy, was the cause of his strengthening resistance. Why, Sandy really believed in him, and so did Hane McBride, the mine super. Les had nothing to worry over unless they found out about his prison stripes.

He saw a rider sloping toward him from the direction of the ranch, and for a moment Les thought it might be Sandy coming to meet him. But Sandy, come to think of it, was over at Three Mile Tanks, mending that broken windmill. Second guess, it might be Sheriff Bill Hanlon, who Les knew had gone to Blanco City. Les always kept tab on the sheriff the days he handled the pay roll. Maybe Hanlon took a short cut back through the 8 Bar range.

But it wasn't the sheriff, either, for Les knew the lawman's big piebald, and the horse this hombre was riding looked more like a desert broomtail. Whoever it was, Les judged he was in a hurry, for the rider came pounding down toward him.

Then Les's whistled tune died in his throat and an icy chill clutched him there. For a certain vague resemblance to a bygone, familiar figure appeared in the hunched-over rider with elbows flopping his sides at every leap of his horse, like a buzzard swooping down upon its carrion.

Almost upon Les, the rider jerked on the reins, and with his presentiment founded in fact, Les Kenney's face went white and he inched his right hand toward his holstered gun.

An evil, confident light smeared the stubble-bearded face of the newcomer and widened the loose mouth in a sly grin. But the eyes held deadly alert as he spat out a warning. "Don't git too close tuh that cutter, Les!"

"An' don't git too close tuh me, Sul," retorted Les. "I'm havin' nothing tuh do with yuh."

Hate deadlocked their eyes, but it was the man Sul who first relaxed in the saddle. With smirking assurance he crooked a leg over the saddle horn to auger awhile, as men do who meet on the range.

"Yuh ain't forgot yore old pard,

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Les? I come a long ways tuh see yuh." The plaint was sinister.

"No, I ain't forgot," said Les. How could he forget! All these years of trying hadn't dimmed the memory of the one misstep seared deep in his soul. "No, I ain't forgot," he repeated bitterly. "What do yuh want o' me?"

"I thought mebbe we could put our heads together an' make us some easy money."

"Easy money?" Long ago he'd heard the same words, when he was just an innocent kid. Easy money. It sounded all right, the way Sul Biddy had put it to him then. The mine pay roll and the mining company was making plenty jack. It wasn't like taking all somebody had. The company would scarcely miss a two weeks' pay roll. Just an adventure, Sul Biddy had explained—a little excitement and nobody hurt.

But Les Kenney's eyes had been opened to the stark truth when, after the hold-up, Sul had coldbloodedly shot down the messenger. Circumstantial evidence was all the law could pin on them when finally they were caught, and Les, being just a kid, got off light—lighter still with good behavior. He reckoned Sul must have served a full term in the pen. Easy money, nothing!

"How?" Les asked without interest. He was satisfied with things as they were.

Sul tossed a nod in the direction of the 8 Bar ranch house. "I seen yore pardner, Les, as I come by yore house. He tells me yuh carry the pay roll fer the Right Spot Mine."

Les was thinking dully that Sandy must have got the windmill fixed sooner than he'd figured, to be at the house so early. Then the import of what Sul Biddy was saying quickened an old fear.

"Yuh saw Sandy? Did yuh—tell him about me?" He blurted the question through blood-drained lips.

"O' course not, Les. I ain't no fool. Besides, I wouldn't do nothin' tuh hurt yuh, kid. We're buddies, ain't we?" The words were softly spoken, low, as the hiss of a snake is low.

But Les grasped at the straw, gathered up the reins. "All right, Sul," he said. "I'll be seein' yuh ag'in." And prepared to move on.

Sul Biddy flung out a detaining hand, and his face went wolflike in savage intensity. "Hold it, kid," he snarled. "We ain't ended this confab yit. What do yuh reckon I hunted yuh up fer?"

Les shook his head. "Search me," he said, as though he didn't know.

"Why, so you an' me kin make some easy jack," leered Sul.

"I'm willin' tuh make mine the hard way," said Les. "It's slow but shore."

"The way I've got it figgered, it's fast an' shore, kid," Sul went on. "An' we kin divvy fifty-fifty."

"Yuh mean——" Les's lips tightened, and anger began rising in his heart.

"Yeah, that's it," said Sul with a grin. "Just a regular stick-up. All yuh got tuh do is tip me off when yo're takin' in the next pay roll an' I'll do the rest. Yuh don't have tuh lift a finger tuh help. Fact is, I'll have the drop on yuh, an' no messenger'd be expected tuh git hisself killed fer a measly five-thousand pay roll. It wouldn't be held agin' you. Why, yuh wouldn't even lose yore job, an' maybe later, after the fuss died out, we could——"

"I'm tellin' yuh right now, I won't, Sul," broke in Les hotly. "The company trusts me. Jest tuh-day they raised my pay. An' Sandy believes in me. Why——"

"That's too bad, Les," muttered

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Sul, with a shake of the head. "I was hopin' yuh'd see things my way. Waal, that's that." Sul uncrooked his leg from the saddle horn and gathered up the bridle reins. "Well, so long, kid. I hate tuh think what'll happen when I tell Sandy an' the mine super that yuh've done time fer robbin' a pay-roll messenger." Sul made as if to ride away, hiding the sly grin on his stubble-bearded face.

Les knew what would happen. He'd lose the best partner a fellow ever had. Lose the job that was getting their little spread on its feet. Lose the spread itself. And now Sul Biddy was riding slowly away. Riding away to scatter the news that he was a jailbird; that he wasn't trustworthy enough to look after the mine's pay roll.

"Wait, Sul! Wait!" he gasped. "Let me—think."

"Shore, kid." Sul Biddy stopped his horse. "Now you're showin' some sense. Do my way an' I promise nobody'll be any wiser."

"But you'll have tuh take it, Sul," Les gritted with a sob in his throat. "I'll kill yuh if I git a chance."

"All right, Les, don't yuh worry," said Sul grimly. "I'll take it. I won't give yuh a chance. But don't yuh come no tricks on me, er I'll ——" In a lightning grab Sul flashed his gun from the holster.

"How'll I know yuh won't tell anyhow?" demanded the cowpuncher, ignoring the gun threat.

"Why, kid," Sul lied smoothly, "I ain't no double-crosser——" he broke off with an oath, tensing in the saddle. "Who's them three jaspers coming yonder?" he growled, like a wolf at bay. "Yuh vouch fer me, blast yuh! Sell 'em the idear that I've been with yuh all day."

Les licked dry lips but nodded, as he identified first the piebald of Sheriff Bill Hanlon, then the tall, lean officer himself, and his two deputies.

II.

The shining badges of the three lawmen as they rode up looked as big as barn doors to Les Kenney. He thought bitterly that before many days maybe he'd be wanting all lawmen's badges to show up as plain, with him on the dodge for another pay-roll robbery.

Then the sheriff said, "Howdy, Les," and nodded curiously to Sul Biddy; and Les Kenney saw from the look in Bill Hanlon's eyes that something was wrong.

"Does he already suspect?" Les asked himself guiltily. He further noticed that the two deputies had blocked the trail. Neither he nor Sul Biddy could try a get-away dash if the occasion arose.

"Have yuh seen Sandy lately, Les?" asked the sheriff casually.

"Not since early mornin', Bill," said Les, relieved at being able to tell the truth. "I just got back from Blanco City with the Right Spot pay roll."

"Right shore yuh ain't been at the 8 Bar since?" asked the sheriff.

"He's been with me, sheriff," spoke up Sul Biddy evenly, "ever since he handed over the pay roll tuh the mine super. I was ridin' out tuh the 8 Bar with him. We're old friends."

"Is that right?" Sheriff Hanlon turned to Les.

"That's right, Bill," he said. "I reckon yuh'll find Sandy at the house —or maybe at Three Mile Tanks, whar he's fixin' the windmill."

"He ain't fixin' no windmill," stated the sheriff in a bleak voice. "Les, Sandy's dead!"

When the sheriff began talking, Les was calling himself a fool for letting Sul Biddy pull a slick one.

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Sul's vouching for Les forced Les to back Sul up, making it appear that they were on friendly terms. Not until Hanlon's statement did Les realize how completely he'd been put on the spot. But concern for himself was forgotten, grief over Sandy's death sweeping aside all other thoughts.

"Sandy—dead?" he managed to say. "It cain't be true, Bill!"

"Dead. Murdered. Shot in the back." Sheriff Hanlon piled up the hateful news in thin, clipped speech, his penetrating gaze boring into Les's very soul. "I was hopin', Les, you might throw some light on the motive, or who the murderer was."

Les Kenney slowly shook his head. "I wish I could, sheriff!" he said, deadly earnest. "I shore wish I could. How—whar——" he broke off, swallowing hard.

"We were ridin' back from Blanco City an' took the short cut through yore place," explained the sheriff. "We found Sandy's body on the ground beside the windmill tower at Three Mile Tanks. At first we thought mebbe he'd fallen off the tower, till we found the bullet hole in his back."

"Then it warn't no fair fight?" Les put in.

"No, we found 'im lyin' thar with his hand still grippin' his gun. He almost got it out o' the holster 'fore the shot hit 'im. He was still warm when we found 'im. Waal"—Sheriff Hanlon wheeled his horse—"I'll send out the undertaker, Les, an' yuh'll do what yuh kin tuh git a clew. I'll come right back soon's I git a fresh horse."

Sheriff Hanlon looked around as Sul Biddy began speaking.

"Les," said Sul, shifting his eyes from the wide, grief-stricken gaze of the murdered man's partner. "I reckon I'll side Sheriff Hanlon into town. But I'll be comin' out tuh see yuh pronto. So long."

Dully, Les felt the threat of Sul Biddy's parting words as he watched the four men ride off. But in the terrible void in his aching heart there was no resentment. Already he was missing Sandy. The best partner a man ever had, and they were just getting on their feet. Just beginning to see daylight after a long period of darkness and struggle. Now Sandy was gone, snatched from him by a murderer's bullet.

Sandy would never know about the boost in pay. He'd never again meet Les's gloom with a cheery: "Dog-gone it, kid, we'll git the breaks yet. Yuh ain't whipped till yuh quit smilin'." Sandy had believed in him.

It was all pretty ghastly to Les Kenney, with only one little ray of consolation. Sandy would never know about him and Sul Biddy, for Sul hadn't talked. And Sandy would never know what he'd agreed to do with Sul.

Beyond all doubt, Sul had met Sandy, otherwise how would Sul have known about his partner. He'd met him at the 8 Bar house, Sul had said.

Les's mind suddenly staggered under the weight of a blinding suspicion. Sul claimed he met Sandy at the house, and Sandy hadn't been at the house at all. He couldn't have been, in the lapse of time it took Sul Biddy to ride away.

Sul was riding fast when he came upon Les, and Sheriff Hanlon said Sandy was still warm when they found him shot in the back. By blazes, Sul Biddy had murdered Sandy! He'd lied about meeting Sandy at the house.

With an oath, Les wheeled and dug the spurs into the startled roan. His first impulse was to overtake the

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group of horsemen disappearing down the trail and blast the smug, lying slayer of his partner from the saddle.

Then calmer reflection came to him, and he drew up the blue roan.

To gun down Sul Biddy now would make him a liar in the eyes of the sheriff after he'd vouched for Sul. No, this wasn't the sheriff's job; it was his. He must pit his cunning against Sul's cunning, his gun against Sul's lightning draw. And he knew Sul had him beaten in both ways.

Even with Sul dead, it would lead to investigation, discovery, and ruin. And now, more than ever, he needed the pay-roll job—needed to go on for Sandy's sake. He must go on to the time he could avenge his partner without losing his hard-earned good name. Les dropped his head and slowly and bitterly turned homeward.

The undertaker and the sheriff came out and they buried Sandy in the rocky hillside at Three Mile Tanks. There was quite a gathering of Sandy's friends, for he was much loved in the community.

Sul Biddy was there, too, and anger welled in Les's sore heart. He thought of how easy it would be for him to step forward then and there, and in the sober moment of lowering his partner into the grave, point to Sul Biddy as the murderer.

He knew his word would be taken and justice meted swiftly. But there'd be an aftermath of questions, suspicions. He let the moment pass, his lips tightly sealed, as the clods fell in hollow, mournful sounds upon the coffin.

After the mound was shaped, a crude wooden cross was put at the head. It was when the gathering was silently filing away that Sul Biddy stepped to Les Kenney's side.

"Keep yore mouth shut er yuh know what'll happen," the outlaw whispered. Then he added aloud: "Les, I'm shore sorry. I'll be comin' tuh see yuh. Anything I kin do, jest call on me." Shaking hands with Les the way a dozen others had done, he left.

Before riding back to the ranch house, Les went over to the water trough and washed his hands. For the taint of a murderer was on them.

For two weeks Les Kenney tried to grow used to the silence around the ranch house, but every whisper of the breeze brought memories of Sandy. He avoided Three Mile Tanks for the first few days, although most of the cattle grazed near the watering place.

Eventually he was forced to ride there, and then he was glad he did. When he went to bed Les Kenney slept the night through, for standing there beside the mound of Sandy's grave, he had mapped his course and was at peace.

III.

Next morning Sul Biddy came riding up and there was a smirky grin on his twisted, boogery face.

"Well, Les," he said, "I reckon it's about time fer the pay roll tuh come through. Thought I'd ride out an' see when."

Les didn't ask him to dismount and come in; there was no need to hide how he felt about things.

"Yes, it's about time," he said. "I'll start from Blanco City to-morrow as soon as the bank opens—about nine o'clock. I'll come out the main road to Double Mountains, then take the short-cut trail through the pines, down into the gulch by the Point of Rocks. That'll put me in two miles from the mine. I reckon that'll be all."

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He turned and started back in the house when Sul's voice halted him.

"No, it ain't all," growled Sul. "I'm warnin' yuh, in case yuh've got any funny idears. If I don't git the mine jack tuh-morrow *fer any reason,* I've wrote the sheriff a tip-off about yuh. An' he'll shore as blazes git it, *sabe?*"

With this parting shot, Sul Biddy rode away, leaving Les Kenney staring hopelessly after him.

The chickens were crowing in a new day when Les piled out of bed, boiled a pot of coffee, and saddled the blue roan. Good daylight found him halfway to Blanco City. He was early and would have to wait for the bank to open.

It had been a sleepless night for Les Kenney. A night of struggle, for Les was young and the love of life was strong in him. Disgrace, death, or the owl-hoot trail, which would it be? By battling it out with Sul Biddy, even if he won he'd lose his hard-earned good name. Sul would drill him in the back if he could; dead, he'd still have his good name. The other alternative was to accept Sul's offer, divvy the pay roll and ride away on the owl-hoot trail.

He was debating with himself when he received the pay roll with the usual "Good luck, Les," from the bank cashier, and he climbed aboard the blue roan with the saddlebags securely tied behind.

He rode back past the Double Mountains and felt the warmth of color on the rolling green slopes and breathed deep of the pine-laden air. And still he was undecided.

Out of the open sunlight he entered the somber, chill shade of the pines, with each of the age-old trees a possible screen for a bush-whack bullet. But he knew he hadn't yet reached the danger zone, and he still hadn't determined what course to take.

At last the moment of decision had come. Just ahead lay the Point of Rocks, and for the first time Les Kenney betrayed signs of nervousness. Somewhere in those rugged pinnacles Sul Biddy was looking down upon him and waiting. And he wasn't waiting for Les's decision; he was waiting, taking no chances, to pot him in the back. Just as he had probably potted Sandy.

Then he saw the crown of Sul Biddy's old black hat barely showing above a jutting rock ledge. With that threat of death above him, life seemed too good to give up. It would be simple to send a bullet through Sul's head, and no one would be the wiser.

A mad desire came to him to shoot first and ask questions afterward. Even though he could explain a death over getting the pay roll through, something in Les revolted at shooting even Sul Biddy without warning.

He sent a hail booming among the rocks. "Don't try it, Sul!" He pulled his gun in readiness for defense of the pay roll.

Gleeful, triumphant laughter was his answer, coming from the rocks behind him, and before he could jerk around in the saddle a terrific blow was dealt his left shoulder. With Sul Biddy's gun still thundering in his ears, he went hurtling from the saddle.

As his rider was blasted from his back, the blue roan snorted with fear, bolted a few jumps and came to a well-trained halt. Les staggered dazedly to his feet with thoughts of the pay roll's safety first in mind. If only he could stampede the blue roan, the horse would not stop till he reached the Right Spot Mine.

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Whatever befell Les afterward didn't matter so much.

Sul Biddy was advancing now with his smoking gun trained on Les and savage purpose lighting his boogery face. "It takes a lot of persuadin' fer hombres in these parts," spat Sul venomously. "Take that bull-headed partner of yores—when I told him about you, he called me some purty hard names, went for his gun an'——"

The outlaw broke off with an oath. Les had seized the dragging bridle reins, looped them around the saddle horn, and was sending the blue roan into a mad gallop with a blow of his hat on the horse's rump.

Despite the vicious desire to finish off his one-time accomplice, Sul Biddy saw the likelihood of losing the pay roll, once the blue roan was stampeded beyond short-gun range. He swung his weapon on the horse and triggered two rapid, deadly shots. Down went the bronc in a swirl of dust, kicking and struggling to rise again.

"That'll keep the pay roll handy," snarled Sul, and again pivoted his gun on Les Kenney.

But Les had taken advantage of the respite from Sul Biddy's gun threat, and fierce strength flowed through his tortured body at Sul's admitted slaying of Sandy. A mad light leaped into his hard eyes and he made a head dive for his gun almost under Sul Biddy's feet.

"Sandy—now the blue roan! Makes two yuh'll pay fer!" he gritted, the fingers of his right hand closing firmly over the grip of his retrieved six-gun. "Side me, Sandy, old pard!" he groaned prayerfully.

But Sandy was far away, and Sul's gun barrel yawned blackly foreboding. Les braced himself to meet the slug of lead ready to burn its way into his unprotected body.

As if sensing the desperate need of his master, the blue roan was again struggling to his feet; and again Sul Biddy saw the possible loss of the pay roll. Ripping out an oath, Sul once more trained his gun on the horse, fired rapidly, and saw the blue roan drop stone-dead. Then, swinging the smoking six-gun back to the wounded man at his feet, he triggered fast, twice.

Sul's first shot jerked Les Kenney's body rigid with pain. But the second shot was the reflexive action of a dying man, for, in between, Les Kenney's unhasty trigger pull sent a slug into Sul Biddy's heart. Then blackness settled over the pay-roll messenger.

When Les Kenney regained consciousness, he heard voices that he recognized. It was Sheriff Hanlon speaking to his deputy, Jim Freal.

"Hang it all, Jim, we was almost too late! I've been watchin' this Sul Biddy ever since I dug out that old poster o' his. This ain't the first pay-roll messenger he's shot up. But it'll be the last, fer old Les sure plugged 'im dead center."

"But, Bill," said Jim Freal, "that poster had two hombres on it. Do yuh reckon the other was Les, like this letter we found on Sul Biddy says?"

"It couldn't be!" snorted Sheriff Hanlon. "I know half a dozen jaspers that picture would fit better. Anyway, a feller who'll go down fightin' tuh save a pay roll like Les Kenney did cain't be anything but straight."

Les Kenney listened with closed eyes, but with a heart at peace. He had changed a lot since that poster was printed—changed beyond all resemblance. And now, in saving the pay roll, he'd made the grade. Never again would the shadows of a prison-stripe past darken his future.

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Sailor Anson

1. The wagon train was in its circle for the night. Sailor Anson was out looking for Hopwell's saddle horse, which had broken loose from their wagon. He found it in a river, up to its belly in water. Walking in boldly, Sailor waded out to lead it ashore. The horse looked at him with terror in its eyes.

2. The river bottom held Sailor's feet like a steel trap. The more he struggled, the deeper he sank. "Quicksand!" he cried. "Help! Help!" and fired one of his six-guns into the air. The struggling, panic-stricken horse was sinking fast; only its head was now above the surface.

3. The horse was now entirely underwater, and Sailor steeled himself for a horrible death. Then a canoe appeared, paddled by an old-timer dressed in the skins of animals. He drew the canoe up on the shore. "Hang on!" he shouted as he tossed Sailor a rope and began to haul him toward the beach.

4. The old-timer said he made his living as a trapper. Sailor told him that he was with Hopwell. "Thet skunk?" the trapper snorted in disgust. "His real name's Pope. He's a deserter from the Mex War. Turn him in tuh an army post, an' yuh'll git a reward."

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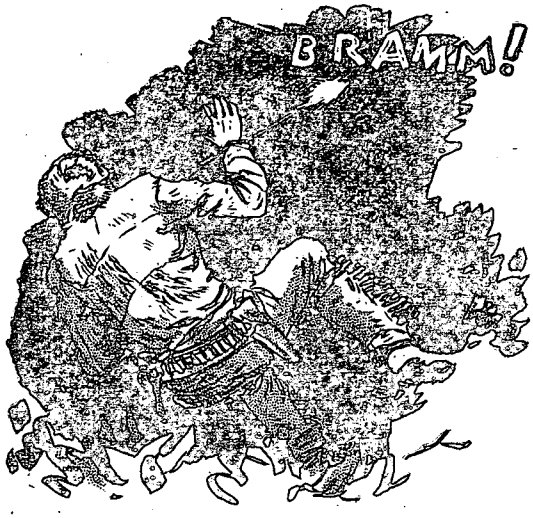
Bushwhacked



5. Night was falling. Out of the darkness came a rifle shot and a stab of orange flame. The trapper screamed once, then fell off the log where he and Sailor had been sitting. Sailor rolled to one side, expecting another shot. As he dived into a clump of bushes, he heard the murderer crashing through brush.

6. Crashing after him, Sailor fired shot after shot at the dim form ahead of him. The murderer fired back, both missing in the poor light. "He's Hopwell," thought Sailor. "He was lookin' fer his hoss, an' heard the trapper tellin' me 'bout him."

7. After burying the trapper's body, Sailor ran back to the wagons and told Hopwell what had happened. But Hopwell was more concerned about his horse than the murder of the trapper. "Now I'll have tuh git another hoss from Squint an' the boys," he growled.

8. Hopwell handed Sailor a lantern and ordered: "Go out an' git some wood fer the breakfast fire. Foller thet ol' Injun trail thet leads off intuh the woods below camp." Sailor played dumb, suspecting an ambush. "Hopwell's skeered I'll turn him in tuh the army," he thought.

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9. When Sailor started out he left the lantern behind. Leaving the trail, he circled off through the trees. "I'll sneak up behind any ambushers," he planned. A man came walking along with a lantern. "Look out fer a trap!" Sailor shouted.

10. Guns blazed from bushes bordering the trail. The man with the lantern fell, riddled with lead. Sailor watched, but no bushwhacker showed himself. "I done my best tuh warn thet pore feller," he grieved. "He didn't have a chance."

11. Two men ran out of the bushes. Sailor crashed through the brush, both guns slamming lead. The ambushers turned and fired back, then were lost among the trees. It wasn't light enough to recognize faces or take good aim.

12. Holstering his empty guns, Sailor dodged behind a tree. The two ambushers seemed to have made their get-away, but they might be lurking in the woods to pot-shoot him. If they should try it, the tree would offer some protection.

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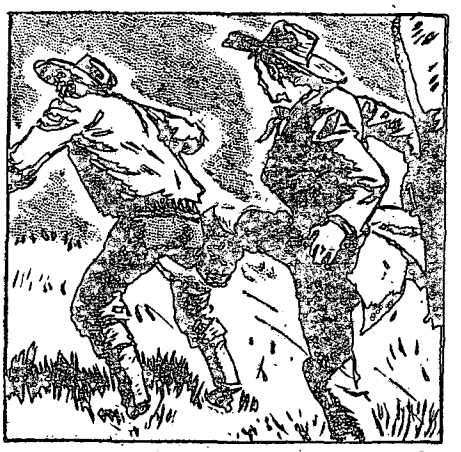
13. From his hiding place, Sailor watched lanterns bob along the trail, carried by wagon men aroused by the shooting. Some one yelled: "The daid man's ol' Sims!" Sailor almost cried out in rage. Old Sims was a harmless Forty-niner lured West by dreams of wealth. Like Sailor, he was getting firewood when he died.

14. Sailor ran through the woods like a deer. It wouldn't be healthy for him if he was caught near the murder scene. The wagon men were in a lynching mood and would stop at nothing. Taking a roundabout course, Sailor returned to the wagons.

15. When Sailor reached his wagon, Hopwell was giving Squint a furious bawling-out. "But, boss," Squint whined, "we couldn't help it if we got the wrong man. Thet Sailor kid foxed us. Yeah, an' one o' the bullets he slung at us plugged Pete in the arm. Honest, it wa'n't our fault."



16. Hopwell's face purpled with wrath. "Git out, yuh bunglin' fool!" he rasped, and sped Squint on his way with a well-aimed kick. "I'd plug yuh, too, if I hadn't lost so many o' my brainless crew. Next time, I'll do it!" Sailor stood in the wagon's shadow, listening.

Next Week: "Sailor Anson's Indian Fight."

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Hang-noose Herd

By
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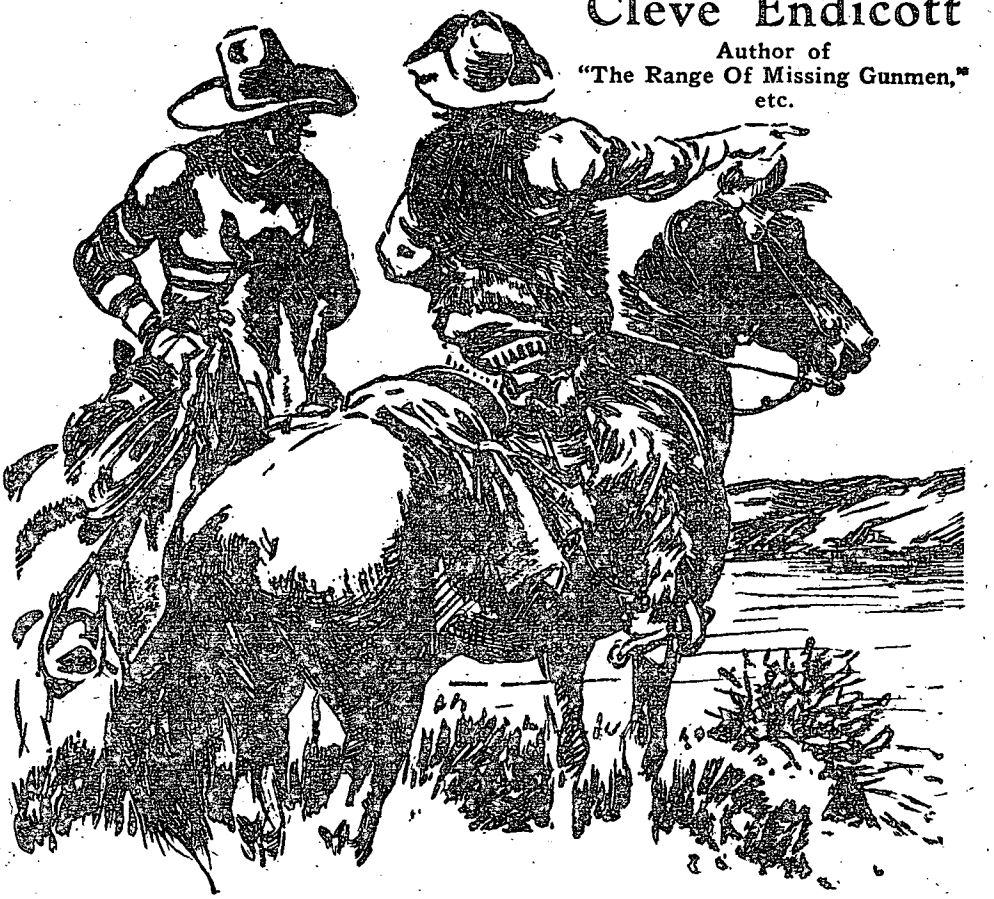

CHAPTER I.

RANCH FIRE!

A COLUMN of greenish-black smoke spiraling from behind a low prairie ridge, brought two dusty riders to a halt on the bank of the Bitterroot River.

"Look!" cried the waddy with the walrus mustache and poorly mended broken nose. "It's raiders, or I'm a four-flushin' chink! Some poor cattleman is gettin' burned out."

The other puncher was a redhead who had a bad habit of getting into meaningless arguments with his older pard.

"Or mebbe some saddle tramp went to sleep in a haystack with a lighted quirly," he remarked sarcastically. "We're carrying home the profits from that hoss deal, Buck. We ain't got no time to go messing into trouble."

The walrus-mustached puncher bristled. He had a sorry reputation in the Bitterroot Mountain country for prodding into fights where he

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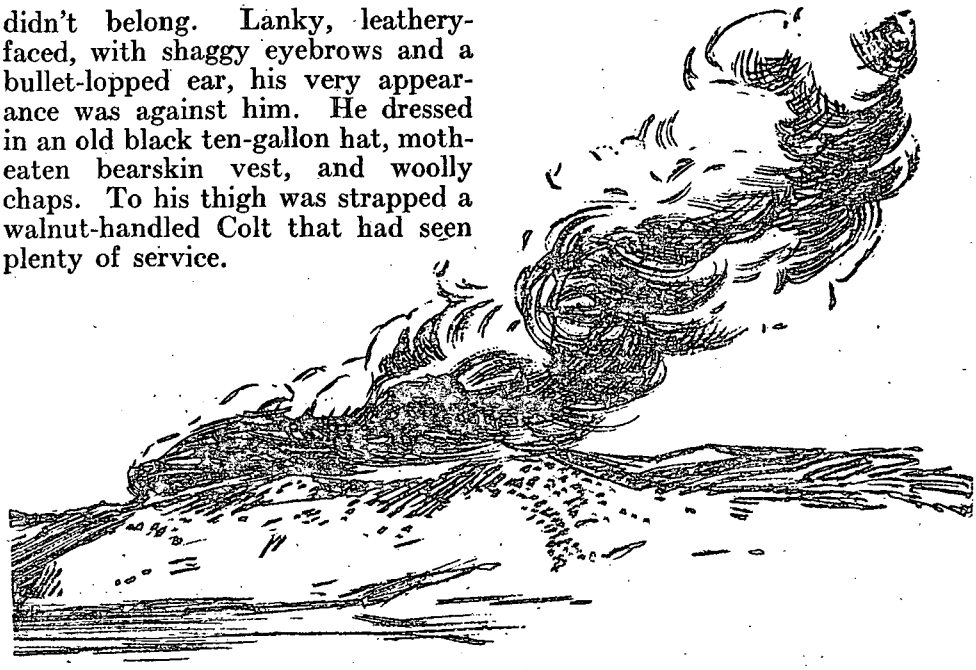
The Circle J bucks bandits, an' the lobos think an army has declared gun war.

didn't belong. Lanky, leathery-faced, with shaggy eyebrows and a bullet-lopped ear, his very appearance was against him. He dressed in an old black ten-gallon hat, moth-eaten bearskin vest, and woolly chaps. To his thigh was strapped a walnut-handled Colt that had seen plenty of service.



"Joe," he snapped, "yuh ain't got no more humanity in yore carcass than a pink-eyed rattler. I'll tackle them yella coyotes all by my lonesome."

With that, "Buck" Foster gave his roan a taste of spur. The animal leaped down the river bank into the gravelly shallows.

"Wait, yuh sheep-brained walrus!" Joe Scott yelled, quirting his bay to the chase. "Yuh know what Billy told us about getting back to Circle J on time. Yuh'll get fired."

The redhead's warning only made Buck Foster more eager to cross the river with faster speed. In a moment, both broncs were hock-deep in the water. The current caught them and spun them around. Squealing with terror, the animals thrashed the river with front legs as they waded with their rear hoofs. The next instant, the riders were wet to the waist in their saddles.

Joe's bay stumbled into a deep pool, and the redhead had to leave its back, to be towed by the saddle pommel. His blue denims and green jersey were soaked. Again, he shouted for his pard to halt, but Buck's cayuse was nearing the shallows of the opposite shore.

"I don't need no help from a tenderfoot what can't ride a crowbait," the walrus-mustached puncher called back.

Joe gritted his teeth. He was a hot-tempered hombre, but he could control himself when ranch business was concerned. In a money belt under his jersey was more than a thousand dollars of wet currency. The sum represented the Circle J profit in the sale of a cavvy that he and Buck had driven to the county seat. Joe

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had strict orders to bring the dinero right back to his outfit, and not to let the rambunctious Buck Foster out of his sight.

The prospect of gun trouble didn't please Joe Scott, but he had no choice. He swam his bay out of the deep pool and to the shallows. Buck Foster had reached dry land. As Joe slid into his saddle, the veteran Buck spurred up the bank, whooping like a Sioux on the warpath.

"I ought to shoot yuh in the back of your empty skull!" the redhead cried.

It was impossible to overtake the lanky Buck, whose roan climbed the low ridge with the agility of a mountain goat.

As the veteran vanished from sight, Joe saw that the smoke behind the ridge was increasing in volume. He heard Buck war whoop, then Joe's bay was at the top of the rise. The cowboy looked down the farther slope into a green valley spotted with piñons.

Buck Foster had already reached the valley floor, and he was racing toward a flaming log cabin. There, a ragged baldhead was bounding in and out of the building, rescuing household goods. But the roof of the structure was groaning dangerously, and the rancher leaped back from the raging furnace.

"Buck!" the redhead shouted. "Don't go in there!"

With a noise like a thunder crash the roof of the cabin gave way. As it fell, the front wall collapsed, and almost caught the bald-headed rancher. Flaming timbers were thrown high into the air. Sparks scattered over the small ranch yard, falling on the shed, the pump house, and in empty corral.

Joe let his bay have the quirt. He watched Buck Foster drag his roan to a plowing halt in the ranch yard. The redhead saw the ragged rancher whirl, shake a fist at the veteran, and cry out in rage. Then the man staggered, and collapsed. The walrus-mustached Buck was out of the saddle in a flash, and running to the well for a bucket of water.

Joe Scott reined his bronc down. He halted beside the moaning figure of the ranch owner. As the redhead dismounted, Buck Foster dashed up with the pail of water, and hurled it at the owner of the wrecked cabin.

"Who done it?" the veteran demanded. "Was it raiders? We seen it all. Which way did they go?"

"Pipe down," Joe Scott ordered, kneeling at the side of the ragged hombre. "Yuh've almost drowned him." He spoke to the rancher. "Take it easy, stranger. Did yuh get hurt any?"

"Stay away from me!" the rancher shrilled. "I'll never tell yuh whar my prize bulls is hid. Yuh kin burn me alive. Yuh kin torture me. But yuh'll all hang by the neck when the law hears about this."

"I'll be a horned toad if he don't think we done it!" Buck Foster exclaimed. "Tell him who I am, Joe."

Paying no attention to his pard, the redhead wiped the rancher's face with a bandanna.

"We ain't raiders, hombre," Joe Scott said to the cabin owner. "We're Circle J waddies on our way home from the county seat."

"I don't believe yuh!" the rancher yelled, knocking Joe's hand away. "Go on an' shoot me. Yuh belong to Blacky Ryder's gang. I know yuh."

Joe scowled darkly. He had heard of a cattle thief by the name of "Blacky" Ryder, who was said to be stealing stock from small cattlemen and driving the herds to Canada with the aid of half-breed Blackfeet Indians and tough border-hoppers.

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"If that's the way yuh feel about it," the redhead said, getting to his feet, "we'll be on our way."

Buck Foster stepped forward. "No, we don't," the veteran growled. "If we don't stop that Blacky Ryder skunk pronto, he'll be headin' over into the Bitterroot foothills after our dogies. Which way did the scum go, hombre?" he asked the rancher. "I'm Buck Foster o' Circle J. Jest tell me whar ter ride, and I'll scalp them crooks with hot lead."

The rancher sat up. His thin face was black with soot, his eyes red with rage. He was not a very handsome sight in his rags. For the first time, a smile twisted his lips, and he looked at the walrus-mustached veteran with hope.

"Buck Foster!" he cried. "I've heard o' yuh."

As Buck swelled his chest, Joe Scott made an ugly face. There was something about the rancher that the redhead didn't like. Joe couldn't tell what it was, but he felt a faint mistrust, despite the fact that the hombre's cabin had been burned, and there wasn't a sign of stock anywhere.

"Blacky Ryder won't be the first snake I've stamped out," Buck Foster was telling the cabin owner.

"Yuh'll never catch him," the ragged hombre said. "I held him off with lead for two hull days. Then, his Injun pards shot flamin' arrows inter my cabin. They must have spotted yuh comin', Mr. Foster, 'cause they rode away like the law was after 'em. I don't know which way they went. I'm takin' my prize bulls an' clearin' out. I'm goin' back ter Dakota where I growed them bulls."

Buck Foster turned to Joe Scott. "We'll pick up their tracks," he said.

Joe Scott was an expert scout. The law in Twin Rivers often called the redhead in to trail down horse thieves.

"I'll do no tracking," Joe replied to his pard. "I'm riding homeward pronto. This hombre ain't staying in these parts. Let him take his stock an' beat it."

"Yuh ain't got no more humanity in yore carcass than a green-eyed buzzard," retorted Buck Foster. "This poor gent can't drive his critters all alone. What if them owl-hooters come back?"

The ragged rancher climbed to his feet.

"Yo're right, Mr. Foster," he whined. "I ain't got the strength ter drive my six prize bulls. But I'm leavin' these parts. I better give yuh the stock. They're worth thousands of dollars. After yuh sell them, yuh kin take yore commission an' send me the money to Dakota."

"Wait a minute, now," Joe Scott protested. "We ain't taking no presents from nobody. We've got to get home, an' we can't drive stock."

Buck Foster's jaw jutted. "He never said nothin' about you," the veteran growled. "This is a deal between yores truly an' this poor feller. I'm lookin' them bulls over."

"They're in the gulch on the other side of the valley, Mr. Foster," said the ragged hombre. "I'm thankin' yuh, Mr. Foster. Yuh ought to make a handsome profit out o' the deal. Yuh might even sell the bulls to yore boss."

Joe Scott groaned in dismay. He knew it was impossible to make Buck change his mind, once the veteran got set on any idea. The redhead had strict orders not to leave his pard. Joe couldn't depart; he had to stand and watch Buck Foster help the dirty, ragged rancher into the saddle of the roan pony. Then the veteran climbed up behind the hombre.

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"Just wait until Billy West hears about this," Joe Scott said.

"Jest wait until he sees me drivin' in with six prize critters," the walrus-mustached cowboy retorted.

"We're due at the ranch this afternoon," the redhead warned. "If we don't turn up with that——" Joe caught himself before saying anything about the money. "If we don't turn up, the boss might come searching for us."

"Don't pay no attention to him," Buck advised the rancher, who was eying the redhead curiously.

As the veteran and the ragged hombre trotted out of the ranch yard, Joe followed him, wondering if Buck might lose interest in the cattle deal after seeing the bulls. Both the veteran and the redhead were good judges of stock. Nobody could put anything over on them, so Joe was hoping that the rancher's bulls were miserable mavericks.

Crossing the small valley, the ragged gent guided them into a deep gully overgrown with thick brush. Joe was careful to keep behind. His hand was near his six-gun, and his eyes were peeled on the rim of the gully. It was a good spot for an ambush. And the redhead realized that a good many hombres at the county seat had watched him and Buck sell the Circle J cavvy, so it was no secret that they were carrying mazuma.

But nothing happened.

The rancher took them up the gully, and into a side cut, where a peeled-pole fence closed off a natural corral of straight high cliffs. Buck and the ragged fellow dismounted, opened a gate, and moved inside.

"There's one of them!" the rancher cried. "It's pure Hereford. Look at it!"

Joe's keen eyes turned to a powerful white shorthorn with brown spots. He caught his breath. The animal was a thoroughbred, one of the finest specimens of Hereford that the redhead had seen in a long time. Its chest was deep and it had big shoulders. For beef, the animal could not be beaten. It was worth over five hundred dollars to any breeder.

"As tame as a kitten!" Buck Foster whooped. "It won't be no job at all ter drive 'em. Whar are the others?"

Joe swung down from the saddle, and stepped through the fence gate. He could see five more bulls in the brush up the cut, each one of them as valuable and husky as the first. They wore a Wagonwheel brand. Joe couldn't remember any outfit in the Bitterroot section of Montana with that sign. He was alarmed. What was a ragged nester doing with such fine stock? And why was the man so eager to give them to Buck without making certain that the two waddies came from Circle J?

"Listen here, Buck," Joe protested. "If this hombre wants to sell these critters, we better send for Billy West."

Buck chuckled to himself. "How much do yuh want fer 'em?" he asked the rancher.

"I'll sell all five for a thousand bucks," the man replied. "Yuh kin keep a hundred dollars commission when yuh close the deal. Send the rest ter me in Jackstraw, Dakota. I'll write yuh out a bill o' sale with my name on it."

Buck chuckled again. "We've got a thousand dollars with us," he said, and turned to Joe. "Hand it over ter him, pard. Won't Billy be surprised when he sees the deal we pulled! I'm takin' credit fer it."

Joe stepped back, eyes narrowed, hand near his six-gun.

"Yuh've got as much chance of

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getting any money from me as a rabbit has got in taking a good dinner away from a cougar," he said dangerously. "I'm leaving yuh, yuh addle-brained rube. Drive those critters yoreself, an' just see the trouble yuh get into."

"Wait, Mr. Scott!" the rancher shouted. "I don't want no money now. I'll prove that I own those bulls."

Joe turned on his heel and went through the gate. Swinging to the saddle, he threw in his spurs, and hunched over the pommel. The redhead was bound for Twin Rivers as fast as he could go. He meant to check that Wagonwheel brand in the sheriff's office. He'd meet Billy West in the distant town and together, they'd return to save Buck Foster's neck.

CHAPTER II.

RAIDER NET.

THE Circle J boss and his Chinese cook were sitting in the office of the sheriff of Twin Rivers, when a sweat-streaked pony slid to a halt outside, and an excited rider threw himself from the saddle. They didn't know the man.

"Looks like trouble," said the sheriff, a tall, grizzled hombre with soft blue eyes that flashed like glacial ice when he was angry.

"So be!" the small yellow-faced Chinaman cried, getting up from his chair. "Perhaps Mistlee Floster and Mistlee Sclott."

The Circle J cook was well aware of the walrus-mustached Buck Foster's habit of getting himself into danger. And he was constantly worried about him. Although he and Buck didn't appear to be the best of friends, for the veteran was deeply jealous of the Chinaman. Sing Lo was no common cook. He could ride and shoot. At one time in his life, he had been an assistant to a traveling magician, and he was not above cheating the eyes out of any tinhorn who tried to take him to the cleaners.

"Sit down, Sing Lo," the young boss of Circle J advised. "Our pards ain't due yet. Let Jim Hawks handle this."

Billy West was no hombre to get excited. Having punched cows since he was knee-high to a grasshopper, he'd had his share of adventures. He had become ranchman through clear-thinking and straight-shooting. Tanned by sun and wind, of medium height with good shoulders, he looked like a bronc-stomper. His batwing chaps, buckskin vest, and green silk shirt were the best that money could buy.

And Billy was sure that his two pards, Buck Foster and Joe Scott, were the best that any hombre could have. He didn't want the sheriff to think that they were harum-scarum, so that was why he had cautioned his Chinese cook. But when the rider from the street stumbled into the law man's office, Billy listened tensely to what the fellow said.

"Sheriff!" the newcomer cried. "Blacky Ryder's gang murdered an outfit o' drovers down the Bitterroot River, then swiped a herd o' white-faced stock an' six bulls. The hull town o' Fast River is talkin' lynch. The ranchers down thar pooled thar mazuma ter buy them bulls ter improve their beef. Yuh better hit Blacky's trail afore them ranchers string up every saddle tramp they find."

Sheriff Jim Hawks blinked and almost swallowed his tobacco chaw.

"Yuh don't say!" he gasped. 'Blacky Ryder is on the loose? That maverick is gettin' too ornery fer his own good." He got up from his

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chair. "Which way did the gang head?"

"Looks like the tracks led north," the dusty rider replied. "But Blacky hid 'em quick. Them ranchers is tryin' ter cut him off from the border."

Billy reached for his gray beaverskin sombrero. "I've heard about that Injun," he remarked. "He's too smart to strike out for Canada. Sheriff, he'll try to hole up in the hills until the way is clear."

"Waal, I dunno, Billy," Jim Hawks replied. "I'm more interested in stoppin' them ranchers from killin' any innocent hombres. I better ride northeast to cut 'em off."

The Chinaman turned to his boss. "Mistlee Floster and Mistlee Sclott clum past Flast Liver," he said.

Billy frowned. "We better take a little ride down that way," he decided. "Those ranchers in that section don't know our pards."

"I'll deputize yuh, Billy," suggested Jim Hawks as he drew a high-powered rifle from a wall rack. "Reach in the top drawer of my desk an' get a badge. Raise yore right hand an' swear."

It didn't take them long to get going. Billy's powerful chestnut horse was tied up at the hitch rail outside the jail with Sing Lo's paint pony. They didn't wait for the sheriff to saddle a bronc in the shed. Swinging into their saddles, the Circle J boss and his cook turned down the wagon-rutted street of Twin Rivers at a gallop.

The sunlight flashed on the silver badge attached to Billy's buckskin vest. Cowboy friends cried out to him, wondering why he had been deputized, but the Circle J boss didn't halt to explain. He and the Chinaman passed the rickety livery, then the public corral and the shanties at the end of the village.

Their route was straight down the bank of the Bitterroot River. Billy's mount could easily have pulled away from Sing Lo's mustang in a sprint. The chestnut had a touch of thoroughbred in its veins. Billy had bred and broken the horse. But now he held the animal to a lope, for the trip ahead was not a short one.

The Chinaman was so light that his mustang might have been carrying a small jockey at a rodeo track. Sing Lo rode hunched over the pommel. Without spurs, he used a quirt when necessary. He knew how to save his horse, and he kept clear of Billy's dust.

For the first few miles, the Circle J boss kept to the stage road to the county seat. It swung far around a line of rocky hills to pass through the town of Fast River. At the hills, Billy and the Chinaman left the trail for a short cut.

The Cirlce J foreman doubted that Joe and Buck would keep to the road. They were fond of plugging coyotes on their rides. Both carried saddle carbines. If they hadn't joined the posse to chase Blacky Ryder's gang, Billy expected to find them by the crack of a distant rifle. So when he and Sing Lo began climbing through the hills, he kept his ears tuned to the east.

The Circle J boss and his cook were an hour out of Twin Rivers when they ran into excitement. They were at the crest of the hills, where the timber was deep, and the farther slope was a maze of gulches and rock shelves. The town of Fast River lay fifteen miles beyond at the end of a rolling valley at the foot of the ridge.

Picking his way down the dangerous grade, Billy brought his chestnut to a sudden halt.

Crash! A shotgun roared not far beyond him. And then the thunder

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of six-guns went up. War whoops echoed. Men began shouting to one another, and Billy could hear their cayuses crashing through the brush, as if they were chasing somebody.

With a cry to Sing Lo, he sent his horse against a low cliff for protection.

"Look out!" the Circle J boss cautioned. "We might get hit by stray lead. It must be the Fast River ranchers."

He could hear the unseen horsemen calling to one another. "He went this way! Surround him, boys!"

Billy tensed as he heard two riders cutting in toward him from the northeast. He glanced at Sing Lo and threw his arms above his head. He didn't want to be drilled on sight.

"Hold your fire, hombres!" the Circle J boss shouted toward the thrashing of brush.

At that moment, a puncher charged out of the trees, six-gun in hand. He was a tough-looking character. Spotting Billy and Sing Lo, he let out a wolflike yowl, but Billy's voice stopped him from shooting.

"A deputy!" the rider shouted. "We've got one o' the sheriff's men. Also a chink."

"Easy with that gun," Billy West snapped, for he knew that the weapon might go off accidentally in the man's hand if his bronc stumbled.

Two more riders broke out of the brush. They, too, were hard-boiled characters, dusty, sweat-streaked, and cussing with anger. Their rifles whipped into aim at the Circle J boss, who was lowering his arms.

"It's a deputy!" one of the newcomers shouted. "Keep him covered."

Billy West didn't like the looks of things as the three men rode forward, hammers drawn back to shoot. His nostrils caught the odor of freshly drunk whisky. He knew some of the Fast River punchers and ranchers, but these hombres were strangers. Since Billy and the Chinaman had the cliff at their backs, they were trapped.

"Put up those cutters," the Circle J boss said to them. "We're from Twin Rivers."

The first rider chuckled harshly. "Keep them arms up, deputy," he snarled, halting his cayuse. Then, to his two friends, he added: "Yell for Blacky, boys. The law must be wise ter us. They're pullin' us inter an ambush."

At the mention of the outlaw leader's name, Billy West felt his muscles tense. He hadn't doubted that the horsemen were Fast River hands. Now, he realized his mistake.

One of the riders was a half-breed. The others were plainly gunmen by the way they wore their holsters. And that meant that they were not tenderfeet with six-guns. They had the Circle J boss dead to rights. One move of his weapon, and he'd be shot full of holes.

"Blacky!" an outlaw yelled. "Let that redhead go! We've caught ourselves a tin-star an' a chink."

Behind Billy West, Sing Lo said breathlessly: "Redhead! Mistlee Sclott! Velly bad trouble."

Billy could hear other riders clawing through the brush. His impulse was to drive his spurs into his horse and send it leaping at the three hombres who kept him covered. But common sense told him that if he didn't die in the first roar of shots, his bronc would be killed. And before he could draw and shoot, one of the three outlaws would tally him. Even if they failed, the other outlaws coming up would nail him or Sing Lo in the trees.

Billy's gray eyes focused on the timber. He saw a darkly tanned

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hombre with a silky black mustache emerging from the trees. The man was not big, but danger was branded all over him. He wore a black beaverskin hat, black silk shirt, and batwing chaps of the same color. His bronc was a fine Morgan as white as morning snow, and its bridle and saddle were trimmed with pure silver.

Blacky Ryder's reputation as a fancy dresser and quick killer was growing rapidly along the Canadian border, where many of the Blackfeet Indians spoke French. The outlaw was obviously a French Canadian. When he saw Billy West, his small black eyes brightened like those of a snake about to strike.

"Ha, monsieur!" the outlaw cried, earing back the hammer of a white-handled six-gun. "You have outwitted me for once. Perhaps you will tell me how you have done it?"

Billy West realized that a bluff was the only thing that would save his life. His one chance was that the outlaws didn't know how many men were with him. Blacky's men had stumbled onto the Circle J boss. They had not crossed the ridge. For all they knew, Billy had a posse at his back.

The Circle J boss forced a hard grin. "I didn't expect to see you, too, Blacky," Billy remarked easily. "Call up the rest of your outfit. I want to parley with them."

The outlaw halted quickly. His eyes flashed to the cliff rim above Billy's head, as if he expected to see the barrels of rifles leveled at him. Then, he looked savagely at the Circle J boss.

"You cannot fool Blacky for long, monsieur," snarled the outlaw. "I know the Fast River ranchers have gone northeast. We are alone."

As the killer spoke, his white horse began to back to the timber. Blacky's hands were not on the bridle. He was guiding the well-trained animal with his knees. He pretended that he didn't notice that his mount was moving.

Billy grinned at the outlaw, then at the other three crooks, who were nervously glancing at the rim of the cliff above the Circle J boss. Something up there made them swing their weapons into aim at the rim.

It might have been the tremble of a branch of brush. Billy couldn't see. But he heard a strange knocking sound, as if some one were striking two small rocks together. It sounded as if a man were telegraphing information to others.

The Circle J boss immediately thought of Joe Scott. Billy and the redhead were not acquainted with the Morse code used by telegraphers. But Joe Scott was an hombre who could think quickly. And by knocking two rocks together, the redhead was making the outlaw believe that a mysterious skulker was sending signals to the Circle J boss.

"Hear it, Blacky?" one of the outlaws asked his chief.

Billy's eyes fastened upon the black-dressed bandit, who was obviously growing more scared of the strange sound.

"I don't hear nothin'," Blacky Ryder sneered. "The other boys are coming." He twisted in the saddle to call back into the trees, and his white bronc turned, ready to leap. "Scatter over the ridge, men!" he shouted into the timber. "We've got a deputy cornered!"

The outlaw chief didn't finish. His spurs raked his beautiful white horse, and the animal bounded like a deer into the trees. Blacky Ryder was thinking only of his own skin. He ducked low on the back of his mount.

At the same time, Billy West heard a harsh chuckle on the rim

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above, and then the voice of Joe Scott rang out.

"If the cutthroats shoot," the redhead called out, as if talking to a band of men, "give 'em buckshot in big doses, men!"

Billy West didn't hesitate. Throwing himself from his saddle, he went for his six-gun. Getting the weapon from its holster before he landed on the ground, he saw the three outlaws rake their broncs with spurs as they turned right and left. Their six-guns didn't aim at him, but whipped up at the rim of the cliff.

The Circle J boss was scuttling away from his horse as the outlaws fired at the brush on the top of the cliff. They hadn't seen a foe, but they were taking no chances. Their lead clipped leaves and branches. There was no shot in reply to their bullets.

CHAPTER III.

HANGING HATRED.

BILLY WEST could have drilled any of the three in the back as they vanished into the trees and brush on the north and south. But he held his fire. It was too late to call them to a face-to-face shoot-out. He wanted to know why Joe Scott had not triggered at them.

"Joe!" the Circle J boss shouted. "Where's Buck?"

The redhead appeared on the cliff rim, yelling wildly.

"After 'em, men! We've got the hull gang penned up! Don't let 'em get away!"

Billy scrambled to his feet, ran to his bronc, and swung to the saddle.

"Are you alone?" he asked his pard.

Joe looked down at him, grinning. "My cayuse is down yonder gully," he said quietly. "I don't want them to steal it. They almost nabbed me an' the mazuma."

As Joe climbed down the cliff, Sing Lo asked an important question.

"What did Mistlee Floster do?"

Joe scowled darkly. "He did plenty," the redhead told the Circle J boss. "One of Blacky's crooks gave him five pure-bred Hereford bulls to sell on a commission. There's some trick behind it, Billy. I left him, an' ran into the gang comin' up this ridge. They tried to stop me for some reason."

"Where is Buck?" the Circle J boss asked quickly.

"Down the valley about three miles," replied the redhead.

Billy listened to the thudding of broncs back in the timber. He could hear Blacky Ryder shouting for his men to gather. They all had turned northeast. The Circle J boss helped Joe up behind the cantle of his saddle.

"We better be finding your bronc," he suggested. "Keep a gun ready."

"The cayuse is southeast," Joe said. "We might get it without any trouble."

Billy touched his chestnut with his spurs, and they started into the trees at a fast trot. The Circle J boss was remembering what the rider had said in the office of the sheriff of Twin Rivers. The bulls given to Buck Foster had been stolen from some drovers taking them to the Fast River ranchers. And the ranchers were searching for them. If they ran into Buck Foster, they'd hang him to the nearest tree.

But why had Blacky palmed the stolen critters off on a strange cowboy like Buck Foster? Did he find that the bulls were worthless? Or was Blacky afraid of being caught with them? And was he trying to fix the blame for the theft and murder of the drovers on Buck Foster? That could not be it, because Blacky

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Ryder was wanted by the law for much worse crimes.

Riding quietly through the timber, Billy worried over the mystery as he kept a six-gun ready to defend himself. He could still hear horsemen off to the northeast. When his chestnut reached the gully where Joe had left his bronc, the redhead dismounted.

"Keep going along the rim," Joe advised. "I'll meet you at the mouth of the gulch."

"Let us know if anything happens," Billy said, kneeing his bronc away as the redhead climbed down into the brush of the gulch.

For a half mile, the Circle J boss and the Chinaman followed the defile, listening to Blacky Ryder's gang racing away to the northeast while Joe's bronc moved below them to the south. They met down the slope at the edge of a draw, where the footing was better, and their broncs turned at a gallop toward the valley.

Far ahead of them, there was still a small spiral of smoke lifting skyward, where the cabin had burned. Billy asked several questions about the cattle deal, and Joe gave him the description of the ragged rancher. Of course, the ragged hombre was not a rancher, but one of Blacky's henchmen. The real owner of the cabin might have been murdered and burned in the ruins.

There was a chance that the smoke might have attracted the posse from Fast River. So Billy kept a sharp watch-out for a cloud of dust down the valley that would tell of the approach of riders. But his eyes were turned in the wrong direction. It was Joe Scott who discovered horsemen racing toward the burning cabin, and they were coming from the east.

"Look!" yelled the redhead. "It must be the Fast River hombres who were searching for Blacky Ryder. They'll lynch Buck if they find him."

"We've got to stop them," Billy West gasped. Then, as he saw that the posse bade fair to reach the the ruined cabin at the same time as he and his pards, the Circle J boss said: "Joe, I've got a hunch that your ragged rancher friend rode to tell the posse about Buck. He might have done it to draw them off Blacky Ryder's trail."

"But they weren't on Blacky's trail," the redhead pointed out. "Blacky an' his gang were hiding on the ridge behind us. They just thought they were following him."

Billy urged his chestnut to a gallop. His neighbors in the Bitterroot foothills were not on the best of terms with the Fast River outfits. There was a good deal of jealousy between them. The Bitterroot ranchers always beat the Fast River drovers to market with their herds and obtained the best prices for beef on the hoof. And in the past several years, Billy's friends around Twin Rivers had won more rodeo prizes than the Fast River hands.

So the Circle J boss didn't know if he was going to have trouble or not. He left Sing Lo and Joe Scott behind him. Pounding down the valley, Billy decided that he had better be careful with his words with the Fast River posse. They might be eager to accuse a Bitterroot foothill waddy of crooked work.

As Billy rode harder, he noted that the posse men were quirting their horses. He waved to them as he drew near the cabin, but they didn't return the salute. The Circle J boss reached the northern end of the lonely end of the ranch yard ahead of them, winning the race, and that didn't please them much.

Halting, the Circle J boss waited for the posse to come thundering in

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from the east. Leading them was a tall lanky hombre with a hatchet face, who owned a ranch called the Rocker Y.

"What are yuh doin' down hyar, West?" shouted the Rocker Y boss. "Who deputized yuh?"

Billy waited for the posse to draw bridle rein.

"Didn't you send a rider to tell Sheriff Jim Hawks that Blacky Ryder swiped some bulls that you bought?" he asked.

"What business is that of yuh Bitterroot foothill punchers?" the rancher demanded. "We kin handle our own troubles."

Billy heard Joe Scott and Sing Lo arriving behind him.

"Well, we've found your stock," the Circle J boss said coolly.

"Yuh did!" cried the Fast River rancher. "Where is it?"

Billy turned to Joe, who scowled and pointed across the valley to the timbered hills. "Up a gulch there," he said. "I left it in charge of Buck Foster. We seen this cabin burning, and came to find what was what."

The Fast River riders turned quickly toward the hills.

Billy, Joe, and Sing Lo joined them as they rode around the smoldering ruins of the cabin.

"This was Pat Hand's place," growled the Rocker Y boss. "He didn't have nothin' ter steal. What was Blacky Ryder doin' hyar?"

"I don't know," Billy replied. "We ran into his gang on the ridge."

Joe took the lead as they reached the end of the valley. The posse followed one another single file through the timber and brush until they reached a gulch. Clattering up the rocky floor, the Circle J boss decided it was better to warn Buck Foster.

"Hey, Buck!" he shouted. "Where are you? It's Joe an' me!"

There was no answer. Billy followed Joe Scott into a side cut, and they reached an open gate in a peeled-pole fence. The redhead raised up in his stirrups, peering up the cut.

"He's gone!" he exclaimed finally. "Mebbe he heard us shooting at Blacky Ryder, so he decided to clear out."

The Rocker Y boss glared at Billy West. "Who was shootin' at Blacky Ryder?" he demanded.

"We were," replied Billy, "when we came down from Twin Rivers. You posse men weren't on his trail."

"It sounds mighty queer ter me," the Fast River rancher said sarcastically. "Yuh better get busy an' find our stock."

There was a growl of anger from the posse men. Several of them made insulting comments about Bitterroot cowboys. One of them voiced a suspicion that the Bitterroot outfits would be glad to see the Fast River ranchers lose the bulls so that they wouldn't be able to improve their stock and get better market prices.

Billy felt a wave of anger, but he fought it down.

"Track the herd," the Circle J boss told Joe.

The redhead swung from the saddle, and moved out of the gate, leading his bronc. He walked down the cut to the gulch, studying the ground.

Turning up the gulch, Joe was followed by the posse men. He didn't get far before he turned into another cut, and went up it. But the floor was solid rock. He stopped several times, getting down to his knees to look for scratches.

"Funny thing," the redhead said. "Buck must have tried to hide print."

"Shore he did!" cried the Rocker Y

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boss wrathfully. "Mebbe he was figurin' ter steal our bulls."

Billy twisted in the saddle. "Now, wait a minute, hombre," he snapped. "We don't take that from nobody. Just keep a tight rein on your tongue."

"Who do yuh think yuh are?" the hatchet-faced hombre asked savagely.

"I'm a deputy sheriff right now," Billy said. "But I won't be holding the office long. Then we can talk this out."

There was another growl of hatred from the posse men. One of them wanted to know why the sheriff had deputized a Bitterroot puncher to hunt for the Fast River bulls. Another suggested that Sheriff Jim Hawks might be in cahoots with the Bitterroot waddies. A third said that it was mighty funny that Billy and Joe had not been killed when they ran into Blacky Ryder.

"Hand over our stock, West," the Rocker Y boss ordered. "Where are they?"

Joe was searching for print, but he could find none. He went up the cut, then returned. He climbed to the tops of the cliff, but the trail foiled him.

"Buck might have doubled back on his tracks," the redhead said. "He's pretty smart."

"I'll say he's smart, like a coyote," snapped the Rocker Y rancher. "What would yuh have done with them bulls if we hadn't come along? How did yuh find 'em ter begin with? Who burned out Pat Hand?"

Billy had taken just about all he could. He unpinned his deputy badge, and tossed it to Joe Scott.

"All right, Rocker Y," the Circle J boss said to the Fast River rancher. "I can take just so much about my pard, an' no more. I'm willing to make those bulls good if they're lost. But if you want fight, Rocker Y, I'll give you all you've got coming."

The hatchet-faced rancher started dropping a hand to a six-gun butt. "Fightin' don't pay for the lives of those murdered drovers," he said dangerously, "an' it won't bring us them bulls. Yuh haven't got a Hereford on yore spread that is as good as the stock we bought. Yuh've given up yore deputy office, West. I'll give yuh exactly five minutes to find our stock, or yuh'll swing by the neck from the nearest tree."

Billy's right arm tensed. He heard the click of gun hammers as the Fast River posse men cocked their weapons. They were twelve to the Circle J three. If there was a fight, more than one man was going to be killed. And there would be no good reason for it.

The Fast River men were in an ugly mood. They wouldn't hesitate to murder. They were anxious to settle all grudges against Bitterroot punchers.

CHAPTER IV.

LOCO LEAD.

THE walrus-mustached Buck Foster was clucking like an old hen over a good hatch of chicks as he drove five prize bulls through timber and crags. He was going to take complete credit for getting those animals for Circle J. It suited him to a T that Joe Scott had run out on him. If the redhead ever started any future arguments, Buck would just refer to this moment, when Joe had refused to help him corral some real fine stock for the outfit.

Behind him, Buck had left the ragged rancher long ago. It was no job to drive the fat shorthorns. Had the animals been range-bred bulls, he would have had a lot of trouble. But they had come from the East,

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off a blue-ribbon stock farm, and they were used to being driven. Buck merely had to ride behind them, yipping now and then to keep them going.

Only one thing worried him. That was the nearness of Blacky Ryder. Buck was afraid of no outlaw, whether a posse was with him or not. But he was afraid that something might happen to the stock. So the walrus-mustached veteran was hiding his trail. He was playing at being a rustler himself.

"If it wasn't agin' the law," he said to himself, "I'd take up rustlin'. Thar ain't a puncher anywhere what could catch me."

Up the gully from the burned cabin, Buck had chosen hard-rock footing for the animals. He had doubled back on his trail in two cuts. And when he passed from the gulch, he chose a route through deep tall pines, where the branches had dropped a soft carpet of needles on the earth. He kept away from brush, for if the stock trampled it, his trail could be followed.

On up the ridge the veteran drove his herd, slipping into deep defiles, climbing out, pointing due west to the Bitterroot Mountains. He never heard the shooting to the north, where Billy West had run into the outlaws. The timber and gulches muffled the echoes. Buck went on, imagining himself safe from any danger.

His bulls were approaching the top of the ridge. The climb had been a tough one, and the animals were beginning to show weariness. Buck didn't want to halt. He yipped them on. But the five critters stopped to rest. When he rode up and flipped a rope end at one animal, it would trot off to the left or right, and Buck would have to cut it back into the small herd.

"Yipee-ee-ee!" the veteran kept shouting. "Git along, yuh thick-skulled varmints. We can't waste all day."

Two of the bulls swung their horns dangerously. Buck drew a six-gun, knowing that if he fired into the ground at their feet, he'd scare them on down the farther side of the ridge. But the thought of Blacky Ryder stopped him from triggering. He yowled again, waved a slicker, and charged the herd with his bronc.

The stock scattered right and left. Wading into the brush, the bulls sank to their knees and snorted. They had been driven far that day, and wanted rest. And no amount of urging on Buck Foster's part would get them to go on.

"Of all the ornery white-faces I ever seen!" he exclaimed. "By heifers, they're worse than mules. I'll set a fire under thar tails."

It was the timber and brush that caused the trouble. Once he could get the animals down the ridge and to the draws and valleys, he knew he could force them along. His problem was to get them to the open. When they scattered in the trees, he was lost.

Dismounting, the veteran found himself a dry stick of wood, and he whittled its end into a mass of curled shavings. Lighting the shavings, he soon had a torch. Blowing on the stick, he got it well lighted, and then he started on foot after the bulls, waving the torch and yipping.

With a bellow of fear, the first animal leaped to its feet and started down the ridge fast. Another followed. Buck chased two more into line. He missed the last one, which darted off along the top of the ridge, snorting in terror.

"Come back, yuh fool!" Buck yelled, racing for his bronc.

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Dropping his torch, he flung himself into the saddle of his roan, and started after the stray. In a few moments, he had cut the animal off, and was hard after it down the ridge. But he couldn't force it toward the rest of the herd. He war-whooped, waved a slicker, and jumped his roan over fallen trees and sent it plowing through brush.

It was dangerous riding, too dangerous. He couldn't see all of the low-hanging limbs ahead of him. Buck Foster's bronc jumped high over a rotten stump, and the puncher failed to duck a branch quickly enough. The limb caught him in the forehead, hurling him back over the saddle cantle.

His head was filled with shooting stars and blazing balls of fire. He threw out his arms, and felt the rump of his bronc slip away from him. Then, the veteran fell hard into deep brush. He couldn't cry out. A steel ring seemed to grip his throat. The world whirled before him. A shudder passed through his gangly frame, and Buck Foster lay still.

He didn't know how long he was unconscious. It might have been a matter of seconds or minutes. His roan had run after the bulls, and he was embedded in a deep patch of buckbrush. As his senses returned, slowly, groggily, Buck felt hot stabs of pain shooting through his brain. He thought he heard music, and it terrified him.

And then, as he lay gasping for wind, he identified the sound as that of jingling bridles and spurs. He tried to cry out, but he had no breath. Horses were passing close to him, a dozen animals, and men were talking.

"Hurry up, boys," one rider said. "He's gone on down the ridge. The deputy must have heard him. The posse will hunt him down an' hang him. That will keep them off our trail. We've got to get to Fast River quick."

Buck Foster blinked at the boughs of a pine tree above him. His first thought was of Blacky Ryder. His next was to count the cayuses in the raider's gang. They didn't seem to be searching for him and the bulls. They had said something about Fast River. Buck wasn't thinking clearly, but the name of the town stuck in his brain.

He gasped again for air. The thudding of hoofs passed him. He could hear the broncs going on along the top of the ridge. Then the beat of their hoofs played out.

"Raiders!" Buck exclaimed with his first good breath. "Raidin' the town o' Fast River."

He moved slowly, painfully. His arms and legs were not broken, but his brain seemed ready to explode. Rolling over to his knees, he crawled out of the brush. Twice he had to stop when a giddy sensation grasped his stomach. For the first time, he was sorry that Joe Scott had left him. He thought of his bronc, and wondered if it had gone on home to Circle J.

On the eastern side of the ridge, hoofs thudded.

Buck Foster staggered to his feet, fear clutching his heart. Blacky Ryder was coming back. The outlaw had given up his plan to raid Fast River. He aimed to collect those prize bulls.

"Help me Hannah!" Buck Foster gasped. "Whar's my smoke pole?"

He turned to the brush, stumbled, and fell headlong. Clawing at the branches, he found his six-gun. The excitement made him think quicker. He could hear the horsemen approaching rapidly. He didn't care how many there were in the gang.

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He'd tackle them; he'd shoot the daylights out of them.

Buck turned to face them, dropping to a knee, earing back the hammer of his weapon. The crack on the forehead from the tree limb was making him a bit loco.

"Come on, yuh dog-faced scum!" he yowled. "Come a-shootin'. Yuh won't git them bulls away from Buck Foster."

A chorus of yells sounded in the trees. And then the voice of Billy West cried out.

"Billy!" Buck exclaimed.

"Put down your gun," the Circle J boss cried.

In a moment, the chestnut gelding with the young rancher in the saddle broke out of the trees. Buck dropped his weapon, breathing a sigh of relief, but not for long.

He saw that the Circle J boss had his arms high in the air. And riding directly behind him were two Fast River ranchers with guns. Then came Joe Scott, also with arms on high, and the Chinaman was far back in a crowd of tough cowboys and grangers.

"What have yuh done?" Buck called, raising his six-gun again. "Stand back, yuh Fast River tenderfeet."

"Take it easy!" Billy West called out. "Have you got those bulls?"

"They're down the ridge headin' for Circle J," Buck replied. "Blacky Ryder jest passed hyar with his gang. He's on his way ter raid Fast River."

Billy's chestnut had halted, and so had the other broncs in the Fast River posse. Behind the Circle J boss, covering him with a weapon, the hatchet-faced Rocker Y rancher let out a mocking laugh.

"So yuh was takin' our stock ter yore ranch," the Rocker Y boss called. "An' yo're tryin' ter git rid of us by sayin' that Blacky Ryder is raidin' the town? That's a good one. We've caught them with the goods, boys. They was tryin' ter steal our stock. Lynch 'em!"

Buck Foster had a six-gun in his hand. He hunkered low to the earth, showing his teeth like a wolf at bay.

"I'm talkin' turkey, dudes," he snapped out. "I'll drill the first skunk ter make a move. Take them guns off my boss."

But the Rocker Y rancher refused to withdraw his rifle from Billy West's spine. Instead, the Rocker Y man yelled to his posse friends:

"If he shoots, give the bunch o' them a dose o' lead!"

"Hold on!" cried Billy West. "My pard isn't bluffing. Blacky Ryder must be on his way to your town. I see the whole thing now. He knew he couldn't get away with that stock, so he left it at the cabin down the ridge. He burned that cabin to make you posse men head off his trail. Then, he swung around the ridge, an' he's planning to strike Fast River when there's nobody to stop him."

Joe Scott looked plenty nervous. He tried to explain things.

"That's right. A ragged hombre gave us those bulls. He said they belonged to him. He must have been in cahoots with Blacky Ryder. The gang killed the owner of that cabin."

Buck was inching back into the brush for protection. "I own them bulls, Joe," he snapped. "Yuh can't talk me out o' them."

"Keep quiet, Buck!" shouted Billy West. "They belong to the Fast River ranchers."

"They don't either, an' they ain't goin' ter git 'em," Buck replied. "Let Blacky Ryder burn their town ter cinders, it ain't none o' my business. I'm collectin' my stock."

With that, Buck's six-gun flamed. *Crash!* He sent a bullet smoking

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over the head of the Rocker Y boss, and made the hombre dive from the saddle into the safety of the brush.

Crash! The veteran knocked the hat from the head of another Fast River rider who was covering Billy West, and that hombre left his saddle fast.

CHAPTER V.

SIX-GUN SHOW-DOWN.

BILLY WEST'S quick thinking saved his life and also the lives of Joe Scott and Sing Lo. The Circle J boss saw that Buck Foster was not entirely in his right mind. The veteran was a stubborn hombre at all times, but he had never done anything to endanger his boss before. Now, it seemed that his thinking apparatus was not working correctly.

"He's loco!" shouted Billy. "Let me take care of him!" And the Circle J boss spurred his chestnut forward.

Joe Scott was quick to aid his boss. "Buck's been eatin' locoweed ag'in!" the redhead shouted. "He'll shoot anybody. Keep back."

"So be!" Sing Lo shouted. "Chinee no likee eat bullets!"

Those words stopped the Fast River riders from drilling the Circle J outfit in the back. The posse men were losing no time in getting out of the way of Buck's lead. They scattered like jack rabbits, each evidently leaving the other to take care of Billy, Joe, and Sing Lo.

And Billy led Joe and Sing Lo forward on leaping broncs. As the Circle J boss neared Buck, the walrus-mustached veteran was already on his feet. He whirled, and started down the ridge as fast as he could go.

"I ain't loco!" he shouted. "I'm pertectin' my bulls."

In a moment, Billy, Joe, and Sing Lo were sheltered from the lead of the Fast River outfits. They heard the riders shouting in wrath that the Circle J punchers had escaped. Billy kept on going hard behind Buck Foster, calling to him to halt and climb up behind the saddle on the chestnut bronc. But Buck kept on.

"I got a cayuse o' my own!" shouted the veteran. "Thar it is!"

Billy saw the veteran's roan ahead. He let his pard reach it, and swing to the saddle.

"We've got to save Fast River," Billy called. "Let the stock go, Buck. Blacky Ryder is more important."

"He ain't either," Buck protested, spurring on down the ridge.

Joe Scott was coming hard. The redhead knew how to make the veteran change his mind.

"Buck's turned yella," shouted Joe. "He's scared of Blacky Ryder."

"Come on, Buck," Billy argued. "If we don't nail that outlaw pronto, he'll be after our stock soon. Those Fast River ranchers really own those bulls. They bought them from drovers."

The punchers were at the foot of the ridge, and they saw the bulls grazing in the green valley ahead.

"Yuh mean that baldhead what got burned out double-crossed me?" demanded Buck. "Did he sell them bulls after givin' 'em ter me ter sell?"

Joe Scott was the only one who knew what Buck was talking about.

"He must have done it, Buck," said the redhead, his tongue in his cheek. "Mebbe he didn't want to pay yuh a commission."

"The skunk!" Buck exclaimed. "I'll be a horned toad if I don't settle his hash." He turned to Joe. "After that, I'll settle yores fer sayin' I might be yella,"

"He's ridin' with Blacky Ryder to Fast River," Joe said. "We can cut them off where the ridge ends."

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"Waal, what are we waitin' fer?" Buck demanded. "Get goin', hombres, before them Fast River fools steal our fight."

Billy West set his spurs into the chestnut. Buck, Joe, and Sing Lo used quirts on their broncs. The four of them could hear the posse men coming down the ridge behind them. Before the riders appeared, the Circle J outfit was out of range down the valley.

Billy's mind was set on stopping Blacky Ryder as soon as possible. The Circle J boss had a grudge to settle with that hombre. And Blacky was not the only one. Billy was thinking that if he came out of the battle alive, he had a duel on his hands with the Rocker Y rancher, unless that man did some apologizing.

At the end of the valley, the Circle J boss found a draw, and raced through it. They knew they were making better time than Blacky Ryder's gang on the ridge, where the going was hard.

The outlaws outnumbered the Circle J outfit, but behind Billy and his pards were the Fast River hombres, hankering to fight somebody. Billy urged his outfit to faster speed. He didn't want to get caught in a crossfire.

A mile farther on, the Circle J boss saw that the ridge was melting away. The long rolling ranges around Fast River were not far ahead. There was no telling if the raiders had come down from the ridge. They could be riding in an arroyo to keep out of sight.

Billy scanned the land for a dust cloud, but he couldn't find any. He led his pards on around the foot of the ridge, and drew into a patch of brush. Listening intently, he could hear no pursuit behind him. His outfit had outdistanced the Fast River riders. Perhaps they had halted to collect the bulls, but it wouldn't be for long.

Billy couldn't make up his mind whether to go on to the town or not. He glanced at the foot of the timber at the place where the ridge dropped to the range. His eyes were attracted to a flock of crows that cawed out of the higher trees. And then, the Circle J boss saw a doe race out of the brush, and go bounding down the range.

"Horsemen," the Circle J boss said. "They're in the trees, looking the range over. Wait for them to hit the open."

But Billy didn't count on the unexpected. Even as he spoke, a rider emerged from the trees, and started down the range at a slow trot. It was a bald-headed, ragged hombre with a soot-blackened face. He fitted the description of the rancher who gave Buck Foster the bulls.

"By heifers, thar goes the snake!" exclaimed Buck Foster.

"Keep quiet," Joe Scott warned. "He's getting the lay of the land for Blacky Ryder."

"I'll be a horned toad if I'm goin' ter let him git away," said Buck Foster.

"Sh-h-h!" Billy cautioned, for he noted that the rider was slowing down.

Perhaps the fake rancher had heard Buck. He twisted in the saddle, and gazed at the brush which hid the Circle J war party. The punchers ducked below the tops of the foliage. But the rider must have seen them.

"Look out, Blacky!" he shouted. "It's a trap!"

"I'll show yuh what's a trap!" Buck Foster roared, and sent his cayuse plunging out of the brush to cut the rider off from reaching the raiders.

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Billy West didn't follow his pard. He whirled his bronc on its hind legs, and sent it up the low ridge slope into the timber. He heard several men cry out in the trees. Then there was the thrashing of brush, the whip of branches, and the clatter of hoofs.

Joe Scott and Sing Lo raced after Buck to help him. The veteran's six-gun crashed, then the fake rancher's weapon replied. A yowl lifted as Buck fired again, yelling like an Injun.

Billy kept going hard after the fleeing raiders. His bronc was trained to pop maverick steers out of brush. He let the animal have its head. Drawing his six-gun, he raised up in the stirrups for sight of his foes.

Suddenly, he saw a rider, chasing desperately after several of the outlaws.

"Halt!" Billy cried out.

The horseman twisted in the saddle, throwing a six-gun into aim. The rocking motion of the man's horse threw his barrel left and right as he fired, and his bullet went wide. But the Circle J boss was shooting at the same time. He saw the rider jerk, then go over the side of his bronc with a wild yell.

It was a warning to the other raiders climbing the ridge. Their shouts told Billy that they were not a hundred yards away. He could hear Blacky's shrill voice telling them to keep together.

Billy spurred on. It sounded to him as if the raiders were turning northwest down the ridge. In that case, they might run into the Fast River posse. There was no doubt that the Rocker Y boss had heard shooting, but Billy didn't know if it would warn the Fast River men.

The Circle J boss spurred the chestnut again. As it plowed through a patch of brush, Billy spied two more foes. They were going down the ridge fast. They were turned in the saddle, watching for him, and he saw their weapons leap into aim.

Billy's bronc was well trained. He jabbed his right knee into the horse, and the animal did a quick hop to the right. It saved his life for the blazing weapons of the outlaw pair missed him.

Before they could shoot again, the Circle J boss pumped four shots into them. They went whirling from their saddles, screaming in agony.

Billy's gun was almost empty. He tried to reload as he pressed on, following the noise of fleeing raiders on down the ridge. The motion of his horse made it difficult to thumb fresh cartridges into the empty cylinders. He feared that he'd run into more fight before he was ready.

And the Circle J boss did.

He heard a yell of terror ahead of him, and then the blast of new guns in the fight. It could be nobody but the Fast River ranchers, who were waiting in ambush for the raiders. Blacky Ryder's voice lifted above those of his bandit crew. And it sounded to Billy as if the outlaw boss were coming back.

Billy drew his bronc to a plowing halt. He almost had his gun ready when the first raider hove into sight. The man was coming hard, hunched over the saddle, rifle barrel pointed ahead of him.

The Circle J boss had no choice. He dived over the flank of his bronc, hoping to draw the raider's fire in order to save the chestnut from bullet wound.

Crash! The raider's rifle thundered at the falling Circle J boss.

The bullet caught Billy along the leather of his cartridge belt behind his back. It was like a hook. It didn't wound him, but it jerked him over in the air, so that he fell flat

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on his back on the ground. He was thumbing back his six-gun hammer as he landed. He heard the raider cry out.

"I killed the deputy, Blacky."

Then, the raider was turning his galloping bronc to stamp out the life of Billy West. The Circle J boss could just see the raider leaning out from the saddle. Flat on his back on the earth, Billy West fired at the man's ugly face.

A black hole appeared as if by magic in the rider's forehead. Then, the man's bronc leaped high over the Circle J boss, afraid of the roar of the gun. As it landed on the other side of him, it shook off its dead owner.

"Pete!" the voice of Blacky Ryder cried out. "Stick with us!"

Billy reared up from the ground, his eyes attracted to a shining white bronc charging through the brush and timber. In its saddle was the black-garbed outlaw boss, his teeth gleaming, eyes flashing. Holding a white-handled six-gun in his fist, he was riding with his knees, turning the bronc right and left with perfect skill.

"Blacky!" the Circle J boss shouted.

"You ain't dead!" Blacky Ryder yelled, and his six-gun was suddenly spitting flame a yard long.

The Circle J boss dodged like a cornered wolf, punching his bullets at the charging killer. But Blacky was trying to protect himself by the neck of his horse. The outlaw's bullets tore a hole through Billy's left sleeve and skinned his right cheek.

The Circle J boss struck off Blacky's ten-gallon hat. It was the loss of the hat that brought the outlaw up from the neck of his bronc. His hateful face made a perfect target for a short fraction of time.

Billy fired for the last time, with the white bronc bearing down on him.

The Circle J boss did not miss. He saw Blacky Ryder lifted over the back of his saddle. The outlaw's knees no longer guided his horse. As Blacky fell in death, Billy threw himself to the side. The big bronc flashed past him. And Blacky landed hard, not five feet from him.

"Billy!" It was Joe's voice behind the Circle J boss.

Billy could hear more riders coming. It was like a stampede of stock.

"Look out, Joe!" yelled the Circle J boss. "Take cover!"

Then, in the trees ahead, the voice of the Rocker Y rancher whooped.

"I heard West! He's right in front of us!"

Billy raised to his feet, six-gun ready. "Come on, Fast River," he called. "I've tallied Blacky Ryder for you. If you want fight, I'm willing."

"West!" the Rocker Y owner called. "We don't want nothin'. We've got our bulls. Hold your fire, Circle J!"

Billy heard Joe Scott and Sing Lo coming up behind him. There was the wild voice of Buck Foster far in the rear.

The Circle J boss stood his ground as the Rocker Y boss and several Fast River hands appeared from the trees. The riders halted, looking at him. Their eyes went to the dead body of Blacky Ryder. Then, behind the riders, a familiar figure appeared on a big bay cayuse. The sunlight glinted on a star on the rider's vest.

"Howdy, sheriff," Billy West said.

"Howdy, Billy," greeted the lawman from Twin Rivers. "Looks like I'm a little late." He halted, glanced about, then grinned at Billy. "Why ain't yuh wearin' that deputy badge?" he asked.

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Billy frowned. "Had to give the job up," he said. "I reckon it was too big for me."

The hatchet-faced Rocker Y owner swallowed hard.

"I made a fool of myself, West," he apologized. "We were pretty excited about those bulls. Mebbe we were trying to put over a fast one on you Twin Rivers ranchers. It turned around and hit us right back in the face. I'll shake your hand an' thank you for what you did."

Billy heard Buck Foster arrive.

"You better make your excuses to my pard," advised the Circle J boss. "He's the one that saved that stock for you. I'm thinking you owe him drover wages on five bulls for a day's work."

"Foster," called the Rocker Y rancher, "I'm sorry I ever called yuh anythin'. I'm shellin' out whatever yuh charge for drivin' stock for one day."

Buck Foster's jaw thrust out. "What did yuh call me?" he demanded.

"Hold it, Buck," Billy West advised. "He thinks you're an upstanding gent now."

"In that case," Buck Foster chuckled, "I don't charge nothin' fer helpin' out a fellow puncher. Of course, I used up almost a hull box o' cartridges on that baldhead. So if yuh feel like sendin' 'em over ter Circle J, I couldn't refuse 'em. Yuh never kin tell when I'll need 'em ag'in."

If past experience proves anythin', Buck is goin' tuh need his cartridges plumb soon. The Circle J cain't stay out o' trouble long, that's one thing shore. An' when they do have another gun battle, yuh'll wantin' tuh be hearin' about it. Yuh kin do thet, too, by watchin' for Billy West an' his pards in Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly. Don't miss 'em!

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By WILLIAM F. BRAGG

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By CHUCK MARTIN

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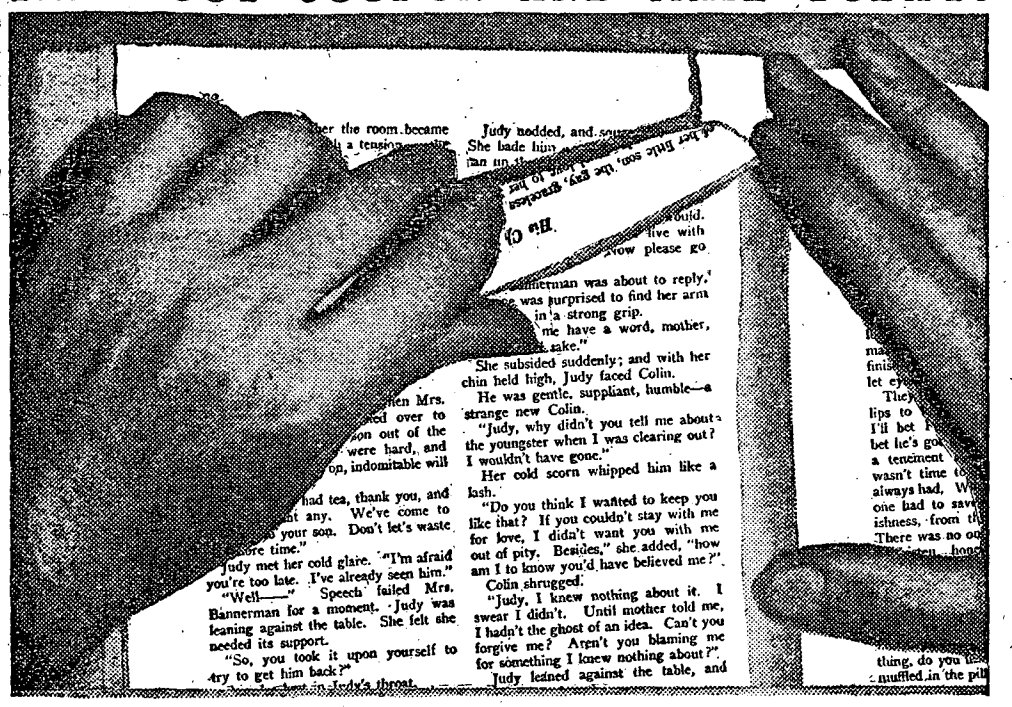
Judy nodded, and
She bade him
Bannerman was about to reply,
was surprised to find her arm
in a strong grip.
me have a word, mother,
sake."
She subsided suddenly; and with her
chin held high, Judy faced Colin.
He was gentle, suppliant, humble—a
strange new Colin.
"Judy, why didn't you tell me about
the youngster when I was clearing out?
I wouldn't have gone."
Her cold scorn whipped him like a
lash.
"Do you think I wanted to keep you
like that? If you couldn't stay with me
for love, I didn't want you with me
out of pity. Besides," she added, "how
am I to know you'd have believed me?"
Colin shrugged.
"Judy, I knew nothing about it. I
swear I didn't. Until mother told me,
I hadn't the ghost of an idea. Can't you
forgive me? Aren't you blaming me
for something I knew nothing about?"
Judy leaned against the table, and
Judy met her cold glare. "I'm afraid
you're too late. I've already seen him."
"Well——" Speech failed Mrs.
Bannerman for a moment. Judy was
leaning against the table. She felt she
needed its support.
"So, you took it upon yourself to
try to get him back?"
had tea, thank you, and
We've come to
your son. Don't let's waste
re time."
hen Mrs.
ed over to
son out of the
were hard, and
op, indomitable will
ive with
ow please go
uild.
nt any.
in Judy's throat.
lips to
bet he's
a tenement
wasn't time
always had,
one had to
There was no
thing, do you
muffled in the pil

DO IT NOW!

SHAVING CREAM..... BRAND.....; BRUSHLESS..... BRAND.....;

SAFETY RAZOR..... BRAND.....; ELEC. RAZOR..... BRAND.....;

RAZOR BLADES..... BRAND.....; CIGARETTES..... BRAND.....;

SMOKING TOBACCO..... BRAND.....; CIGARS..... BRAND.....

DO YOU DRINK: SCOTCH..... BRAND.....; BEER.....

WHISKEY..... BRAND.....; GIN..... BRAND.....

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The contributions will be judged on their merits as amateur contributions. The work of professionals is not desired.

Manuscripts should preferably be typed, on one side of the paper only, and double-spaced. However, full consideration will be given to manuscripts neatly hand-written in ink.

The author's name and address and age should appear on the first page.

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LIKE we been tellin' yuh, us 3W cowhands don't perfess ter be no high-falutin' literary critics. But this week, Jeff Hokit pokes his nose inter somethin' we calls plumb important fer our amachoors.

"Boss," he asks, "wouldn't it be a good idea tuh tell what we looks fer in stories we passes jedgment on?"

"Thet's easy," snorts Bud Jones. "If we likes 'em, thet's enough."

"But what is it 'bout 'em thet we admiah?" the Silver Kid wants ter know. "Theah must be a few rules thet'll help ouah writahs."

"Waal," opines Buck Foster, "a story's got ter be 'bout real folks."

"Fer once, mosshorn," speaks up Joe Scott, "yuh let out somethin' 'sides hot air. Reckon thet's what the Boss calls characters."

"Me," says Bugeye Martin, "I likes p-p-plenty shootin' an' h-h-hard ridin' an' a g-g-good fist f-f-fight now an' then."

"Yeah, action," agrees Sailor Anson. "A Western story shore should have thet, an' plenty."

"Me likee plotee," squeaks Sing Lo. "Good stoly makee me likee good cowboy, hatee bad one, so be."

"He means he likes a good plot with a hero he likes an' a villain he hates," Billy West explains his lingo.

"Kin yuh think of anything more, Boss?" asks Bud Jones.

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"Reckon the word 'suspense' covers Sing Lo's likes," we adds. "Them rules seems ter cover what the amachoors should foller. Waal, hyar's the openin' story. See if yuh kin foller them rules jedgin' it."

GUNNER'S DEATH SONG

By Jane Kennedy—Age 16
Bowling Green, Kentucky

The desert sun was low over the rim of Nugget Canyon when the boy painfully raised his head and looked around him. His eyes dimmed with tears as they rested on the mounds that had been his mother and baby sister, and as he looked, he swore that some day he would kill Jake Cassidy and his Rimrock Gang.

Eight years passed. A dusty cowboy rode up to the Five Aces Saloon in Rimrock. His face was that of a boy, but his hair was gray.

Striding boldly up to the bar, he called for buttermilk. The bartender gaped, and some one in the crowd snickered. As he stood there drinking his milk, more than one rough citizen of Rimrock noticed his guns and how he wore them. Their triggers filed off, they rode low in tied-down holsters.

At this moment, a big, burly hombre came striding in through the door, followed by three of his men. As they paused to survey the long room, the young waddy carefully removed his hat and laid it on the bar. Then he turned and calmly said to Jake Cassidy, who was staring in amazement at the gray hair.

"It happened eight years ago, Cassidy, when a boy was brutally beaten for protecting his mother and baby sister, who were then shot down cold."

"Get him, men!" cried Cassidy with an oath, and went for his own gun.

A chill as of death seemed to stop his draw as the whistled tune, "A Death Song At Twilight," fell on his ears. A glance showed him that twilight was falling, and he knew that he was facing the "Gunner" and his life was nearing its end.

The guns of his three gun-swift henchmen were out and leveled, but before they could fire the roar of mighty Colts blended with the whistled tune to form their own song of death.

The smoke thinned, cleared out, and there on the floor lay three dead outlaws. Jake was standing face to face with the fastest gunman among outlaws—the "Gunner."

For the space of a minute, Jake looked about him while "A Death Song At Twilight" still floated in the air, then he went for his guns. The Gunner waited until Cassidy's guns cleared leather, then with a blinding draw his own guns came up and roared.

Once again, out of the gun smoke came the haunting strains of "A Death Song." Then Cassidy toppled heavily to the floor, and a boy's oath of justice was kept.

"Rules or no rules," busts out Buck Foster, "I'll be a horned toad if I ain't votin' fer thet un!"

"Don't t-t-tell him a g-g-gal writ it," stutters Bugeye Martin. "He m-m-might change his v-v-vote."

"I don't believe no gal writ it!" roars Buck. "Show me her name!"

"Yuh couldn't read it nohow, nitwit," snickers Joe Scott. "Go on with the next, Boss."

Buck sputters an' cusses so, we cain't hear the vote bein' took. When we're shore it's "yes" all round fer the story, we reads the next:

GALLOWS' BAIT

By Cecil G. Winstead
Farmville, North Carolina

Spectators standing in front of Baxter's Saloon stared curiously at the youthful stranger on the big bay horse, for strangers were decidedly unwelcome in Brand City. "Ace" Edwards, the rugged dark-haired rider, did not mind. He dropped to the ground and tied his horse.

Inside the saloon, Ace took a place beside the bar. As he sipped a soft drink, his eyes searched the room. Presently he felt a heavy hand on his shoulder. Turning around, he came face to face with a large muscular man, with thick lips and small, piggish eyes.

"Hombre, my name is Blake Baxter," the big man said, coldly. "I run this heah place, and the town, too. I got a little advice fer you!"

Ace set his glass on the counter. "Good advice is always welcome, mister," he replied, evenly.

"Strangers don't git along so good around heah," Baxter leered. "The place is already too crowded."

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"I shore thank you, Mr. Baxter, but I wasn't aiming on movin' on. You see, your town kind of appeals to me," Ace said calmly.

"In that case you'll find yoreself in fer a lot o' trouble," Baxter snapped angrily. "You got five minutes to git out o' town."

Ace's eyes narrowed to pin points of fire and his jaw set firmly. "I'm a-staying," he declared.

Baxter's hand dropped slowly toward his gun. Before he could draw, a heavy-set man lunged through the front door with two guns in his hands.

"Baxter," the newcomer shouted. "I'm gunnin' fer you. You've double-crossed me long enough!"

The saloon owner was plainly afraid of the gunman. "Now, listen, Spike. I'll settle with you. Give me a chance."

"Right you will," "Spike" snarled, as he aimed his guns at Baxter's heart. "I'm going to settle it fer good!"

With lightning speed, Ace Edwards snatched his own guns into action. Lead tore into Spike's shoulder, and the big fellow dropped to the floor.

With trembling hands, Blake Baxter wiped the sweat from his forehead as he turned to face the youth.

"Thanks, stranger," he mumbled. "You shore saved my life, and I appreciate it. Stay around heah long as you please and make yoreself to home."

Edwards grabbed the saloon owner by the arm and swiftly handcuffed him. A look of amazement spread over Baxter's face. "Say, what is this?" he gasped.

"I saved yore life, Baxter, because I don't like to see the law cheated," Ace said slowly. "I'm a ranger, and I'm a-takin' you back to hang for that murder you committed in Randall County three years ago!"

"Now, thar's another thet seems tuh foller the rules," says Bud Jones.

"While we're thinkin' of it," we busts in, "we ain't gittin' so many pomes these days. Whar is all our rhyme jugglers holed up?"

"Mebbe they'll come out ag'in in the springtime," says Jeff Hokit.

"Then they'll m-m-miss plenty ch-ch-checks in the m-m-meantime," says Bugeye Martin.

But the vote says Señor Winstead is drawin' one, so we starts readin':

THE PAY-OFF

By Charles W. Brammer—Age 26
Dayton, Wyoming

Clint Forbs, newest rider for the Bar K outfit, lifted his guitar from its peg in the bunk-house wall above his bed and began strumming it softly.

"Care to hear a few tunes murdered, boys?" he asked.

The other riders shifted uneasily and glanced from Clint to the open door of their foreman's room. None spoke.

The cowboy smiled and swung into the "Cowboy's Lament." His thin fingers flickered along the strings, and his voice picked up the tune.

"Shorty" Evans edged along his bunk and said: "Tobin's goin' to raise hell, Clint. He hates guitars. I've seen him throw waddies out and their instruments after them."

"So what?" Clint asked. "I reckon I'd as well get it now as farther up the creek."

"Listen," Shorty went on hurriedly, "I've seen what happens. One time Tobin smashed a guitar over a feller's head."

"Yeah, Shorty, I heard he did, but I reckon there ain't no law against playin'. None but Bill Tobin's own."

Clint went on strumming, blending his voice to the tunes.

"Stop that racket!" the foreman bellowed. "I'm tryin'–to read in here. My old hound kin howl better'n that and stick nearer a tune."

"Seems to me a dog o' yours would have a lot to howl *fer*," Clint observed dryly.

The foreman slammed his magazine down with a bang and stalked to the door. His bulk almost filled the opening.

"Listen, you," he snarled, "no more racket."

Clint hung his guitar back on its peg and moved to a table. A hushed moment ensued while Bill glared from one to another of his riders, then back to the cowboy who dared to defy him.

"Any objections to fortune-tellin'?" Clint asked, selecting a deck of cards.

"Yuh might try tellin' mine," Tobin growled. "If I don't like it I'll throw yuh out."

The cowboy slid into a chair and riffled his deck. He pulled out a card, studied it, then jabbed it back and drew another.

"Well, what about it?" Bill demanded.

"The cards say you're a bully. Yuh like mostly to mawl some kid or old man that can't fight back."

Tobin dived at Clint, but stumbled over

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the empty chair and sprawled to the floor.

"Sorry, boss, but I didn't have time to move that chair."

The foreman picked himself up and charged again. The slim cowboy swayed between Tobin's flailin' arms and drove his shoulder hard against the other's ribs, sending him reeling across the big room.

"Pardon me, boss, but there wasn't room on either side for me to pass."

Tobin roared his challenge and rushed in, trying desperately to clinch with the cowboy, but a flock of hard brown fists met him. Lefts and rights hammered him backward. He ducked low, trying to dodge the stinging knuckles. A hard knee rammed into his face and straightened him up. Then more lefts and rights put him down in a disheveled heap.

Clint lifted his guitar from its peg and swung it hard at his foreman's head. It crashed to splinters.

"I reckon that finishes me here," Clint observed, "but I promised dad years ago that I'd pay this big hombre off for him."

"Clint wa'n't the only one thet paid off, Boss," says Jeff Hokit. "Yo're payin' the writer off on thet un, or I'm a durned pore detecative."

"Us waddies shore admits thet," speaks up Joe Scott.

"Wh-wh-what?" yelps Bugeye Martin. "Yuh admits thet J-J-Jeff's a durned pore d-d-detecative?"

Joe scratches his chin. "Waal, now yuh mention it, mebbe yo're right. I ain't sayin'."

But we all shore says "yes" on the story herself, an' we reads:

THE MAKIN'S OF A DEPUTY

Granite City, Illinois

By Alfred T. Aten

Steve Martin took the last .45 shell from the box, pushed it in his gun belt and tossed the box out in the street. It was early, but Steve was eighteen to-day, and he lost no time in coming to town.

Steve was proud of his birthday presents, a fine blooded black horse and a pair of pearl-handled "irons," the latter being property of his father, given to him by his grandfather.

He stepped off the board walk and patted his horse's nose.

"To-day's our day, ain't it, pal?"

The horse jerked its head up and down, then gave a big snort.

Steve Martin returned to the walk and started down it, whistling as he peeped in the store windows to see if any of the stores were open. He finally came to the bank on the corner, glancing through the window and starting on. Then a bullet crashed through the front-door glass, knocking Steve's hat from his head.

He dropped to a crouch, and a grin came on his face. Reaching down, he felt the smooth pearl handle of his father's six-gun, as he watched the three masked men in the bank duck for cover.

Martin jumped through the framework that had been a glass door, dropping to the side of a large desk. A bullet pinked a glass bottle over his head, the fluid pouring on his face. Steve wiped his hand across his face, grinning as he looked at the red ink.

"Now I'll show these skunks some of my skill that Gramp Martin showed me," said Steve to himself.

He sighted down the six-gun and squeezed the trigger. As the roar of the gun faded, an outlaw yelled, rose from his shelter, and pitched head-first to the floor.

Bullets whined from the hard-surfaced desk top, sending splinters into the young cowboy's face.

Steve jumped clear of the desk as one of the two men yelled, "Rush 'im, Ike!"

Steve Martin thrilled to the thought of two-to-one odds against him. He felt something jerk his arm with mighty force, a burning pain that left his muscles weak. The grin left his face for a second, then returned. He gritted his teeth and fired. The heavy six-gun roared twice, then twice more. One outlaw grabbed at his shirt front and spun around, falling. The other fell head-first to the floor, with a hole in his forehead.

The sheriff and several men came through the framework of the door, guns in hands, ready for the worst.

"My gosh, if it ain't Steve Martin, and the kid's been shot!" yelled the sheriff, as he saw the red fluid on the kid's face.

"Only a flesh wound in the arm, sheriff. The other is the leavin's of a bottle of red ink busted in my face."

The sheriff looked over the dead outlaws, then came back to Steve Martin: "Nice shootin' fer a buckaroo yore age, Martin. How'd yuh like a deputy job?"

"Gosh! Guess I'll take it, sheriff, but I don't see how a fellow kin have so much luck, and on his birthday, too."

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"Kind o' looks to me like that amachoor's got the makin's of an author," says Billy West.

Ain't none of us got a quarrel tuh pick over brandin' it, so we gives it the O. K. an' reads:

A JOB WELL DONE

By J. W. Wilson

Navasota, Texas

Jim Tollivar crouched behind a large, white rock and listened to the song of bullets as they glanced from the hard surface of his retreat.

Little green lizards scurried over the white-hot top of the rock. They seemed to leer at the sweating human that had invaded their domain.

Jim was beginning to believe that they were no longer lizards; they had become devils, dancing in time with the other devils of the desert, the wavering heat waves. For Jim had been there an hour now. An hour in the burning sun, with whistling lead streaking through the air toward him.

Sweat coursed down the unfortunate man's face and back. He lay in his uncomfortable position and wondered how he could escape with a whole skin. Only an hour ago he had been riding down the trail, with no thought of danger in his mind. Then came that first shot that had killed his horse under him. The next took off his hat and sent him dodging for the only available cover, this lone, large boulder.

He had tried to return lead for lead, but he could not locate his tormentor. Too, if he exposed even one little bit of his anatomy, the shooting ability of the rifleman caused showers of sand to spring up uncomfortably close to the exposed part.

The beating sun was beginning to warp the thinking of the trapped man. Soon he would stand up and invite the shooter to put a bullet into him. He could be no worse off in hell than he was here. How did he ever allow himself to get into such a plight?

Suddenly the shooting stopped. Jim cautiously raised his hat above the rim of his cover. Nothing happened.

"They must 'a' left," mused Jim. "I reckon I'll take my chances on gettin' out of here." He stood up and walked from behind the rock.

A single shot rang out; and Jim Tolliver, bank robber and murderer, fell, with a bullet in his heart, to the shifting, sun-baked sands.

On a hill about five hundred yards to the right of the trail, Mort Thompson, brother of the murdered sheriff of Pecos County,

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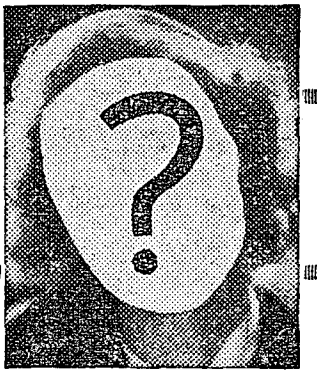
HOLLYWOOD  WANTS YOU

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wiped the dust from the telescope of his 30-'06 deer rifle and mounted his horse. Riding away, he complimented himself on his handiwork. His brother's murderer had died in exactly the way that the sheriff had met death.

"Yes, it was a job well done," Mort thought as he rode away.

Thet story goes inter the corral, too, an' Buck Foster hollers:

"Help me, Hannah! Only one writer ter-night told us their age!"

"We noticed thet, too, Buck," we says. "We'd shore hate ter git riled an' turn down stories fer thet reason, but readers wants ter know the ages of amachoors, an' yuh cain't blame 'em. Waal, hyar's a pome."

THE PUNCHER FROM THE DOUBLE O

By Harry F. Seay—Age 23
Winston-Salem, North Carolina

The punchers all called him a coward,
Said he would from his shadow run;
They told him there was no use
To carry his .45 gun.

He was the best on the Double O
When it came to punching steers,
But when some one started a fight
He'd shy away in fear.

Then one day while riding the range,
He espied in the valley below
Three rustlers changing a brand,
And the brand was the Double O.

His six-gun belching lead,
He charged with an Indian yell.
One rustler yelped in pain;
One died as he sagged and fell.

The third let go of his gun,
Shot his hands up with a dart.
And the puncher had proven his worth
With a fighting, courageous heart.

"Mebbe we wasted time givin' the amachoors all them rules," says Sailor Anson as the percession starts ter the bunk house. "They jest seems tuh foller 'em sort o' natural."

"Yeah, but if they *do* help any of 'em," says Billy West, "I fer one calls it time plumb well spent."

Seein' how the spirit o' the West is ter help one another, we agrees with Billy.

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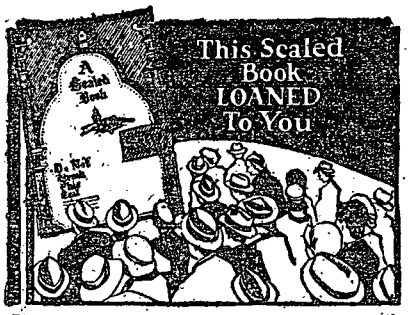

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Fiddlin' Joe's Song Corral

This department is for the purpose of preserving the old cowboy songs and Western range ballads, and their history. Readers can help in this work by sending in any such songs that they know, especially those handed down by word of mouth by parents, grandparents, and other old-time Westerners. The story of the song, how it came to be written, and the facts on which it is based should accompany the words whenever possible.

Address all letters to Fiddlin' Joe, care of Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

HOPE yuh feel like singin' tuhday, folks, bein' as how thet's what we're gathered hyar in this Corral tuh do.

How's everybody comin' along? Is the search fer songs progressin'? I hope I'll be hearin' from some o' you deputy searchers soon. Remember thet in yore own community thar's liable tuh be plenty o' material, if yuh just go out an' hunt fer it. This hyar department is fer the purpose o' preservin' the ol' cowboy songs an' ballads, but thet doesn't mean thet its readers have tuh restrict themselves tuh Western songs.

By far the biggest fun in collectin' ol' songs is the thrill of findin' 'em yoreself. So, even though yores truly is interested in songs o' the West,

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jest fer friendship's sake, if nothin' else, he's interested in anything else you Corrallers find in yore own communities. Share yore song-huntin' thrills with me, folks. Thar's nobody would appreciate 'em more!

Now tuh start with tuh-day; hyar's two short numbers on cowboy life, by Alberta G. Clark, who is one of the editors of an interestin' collection o' songs called "Old Trails."

COWBOY'S LUNCH *

By Alberta G. Clark

Blazin' sun straight overhead,
Time Old Paint and me was fed;
But camp's a right smart piece away,
What'll we use for grub to-day?
Reckon as how I'll have to stoop
And drink from the spring.
There, now, that's soup.
And while Old Paint crops here I'll make
A smoke in the shade. That is the steak.
What kind of pie? Now, let me see:
Pull the old belt up, one, two, three.
There's twenty miles between supper and me!

CAMP FIRE **

By Alberta G. Clark

Outside its circle close lie dark and wild,
Far heaven of dim stars and lonely way;
We ply the blaze with wood, though weather's mild,
For camp fires link to-morrow with to-day.

Friend of to-night, sharing my meat and bread,

* ** (Printed by courteous permission of the editors, from "Old Trails," published by the Sublette Monitor Press, Kansas.)

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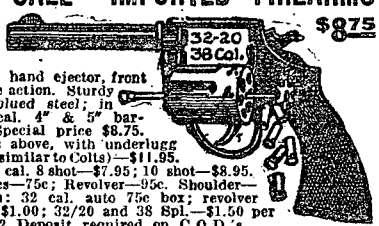

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Friendship grows fast by lonely hours pressed,
Too soon the fire must die, it's time for bed;
To-morrow you ride east and I ride west.

I reckon yuh don't have tuh be a cowboy, eh, folks, tuh know the special feelin' a camp fire at night kin give yuh. Dad-burn it, I reckon thet thar ain't nothin' kin beat it fer warmth an' friendliness!

Truett Matthews, of Texas, sent in a couple of fragments an' they're so short I reckon we kin have both. He said as how his family are the only people he ever heard singin' 'em. The first one goes like this:

Stay at home, boys! Stay at home, boys!
Don't go to that place that they call Cheyenne,
They'll rob you and murder you and take all your bills,
And leave your corpse lying in the lonesome Black Hills.

An' the second one goes like this:

When I was wild and reckless
To Mexico I did go;
Now I'll go back to Texas
And settle down to life once mo'.

Go back to friends and sweethearts,
Tell others not to go
To that forsaken country—
Down to old Mexico.

The followin' song was written by an ol' cowboy, C. E. Johnson, an' recited by him at the Old Trail Drivers' Reunion, in 1925, at San Antonio, Texas. It's a little gloomy, but I reckon yuh kin stand thet.

THE OLD COWBOY*

By C. E. Johnson

I rode a line on the open range
When cow-punchin' wasn't slow;
I've turned the long-horned cow one way,
And the other the buffalo.

I went up the trail in the '80s—
Oh, the hardships I have stood!
I've drank water from a cow track, boys,
When you bet it tasted good.

* Reprinted by courteous permission of J. Marvin Hunter, editor of the *Frontier Times*.

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I've stood night guard many a night
In the face of driving storm,
And sang to them a doleful song,
While they rattled their hocks and horns.

I've been in many a stampede, too;
I've heard the rumbling noise;
And the light we had to turn them by
Was the lightning on them horns.

But many a boy I worked with then
Is sleeping on old Boot Hill,
For his last cow drive was made to Dodge
Over the Jones and Plummer Trail.

They're building towns and railroads now,
Where we used to bed our cows;
And the men with the mule, the plow, and the hoe,
Are digging up our old bed grounds.

The old cowboy has watched the change
Has seen the good times come and go—
But the old cowboy will soon be gone
Just like the buffalo.

TO A PACK HORSE

By Robert V. Carr

Sun hain't up and grass still wet,
Ghostlike moon a-ling'rin' yet,
Birds a-wakenin' one by one,
Bacon fried and coffee done,
Bed rolled up—well, I declare!
What you think you're doin' there?
Say, old hoss, let me inquire
Why you're nosin' 'round my fire.
Huh, he nickers, without fail:
"Hain't it time to hit the trail?"
Some folks have the nerve to say
That a pack hoss that-away
Hain't no soul, but I don't know,
Whether thet idee is so.
Seems thet plug's most human when
He gets restless now and then.
And to show his heart's desire
Comes a-nosin' round my fire;
When he nickers, without fail:
"Hain't it time to hit the trail?"

An' now we've jist about got time fer a little verse sent in by John A. Lomax. It's entitled "Old Paint," and it's a cow-puncher pokin' fun at his cow horse when he sings:

"Old Paint's a good saddler, he paces when he can,
He paces all the time if he's not in the sand.
Old Paint had a colt way down on the Rio Grande,
We roped him and we branded him and called him Cheyenne."

So long, folks. I'll be seein' yuh next week.

ELECTRICITY

"LEARN BY DOING" 12 weeks training

TRAIN NOW FOR A BETTER JOB!

My Big Free Book tells you how we train you in 12 weeks—to start in the growing field of Electricity by actual shopwork on real electrical machinery in the Big Chicago Coyne Shops—not by books or correspondence. Expert instructors guide you every step of the way. Experience or advanced education not needed. Many Earn While Learning. Free lifetime employment service. Diesel Engine, Electrical Refrigeration and Air Conditioning instructions included. Mail Coupon for FREE BOOK and all Facts.

H. C. LEWIS, Pres., COYNE ELECTRICAL SCHOOL
500 S. Paulina St., Dept. C8-45, Chicago, Illinois
Send Big Free Book with facts on Coyne training and tell me about your "Plans" to help me.

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ADDRESS _____
CITY _____ STATE _____

MEN

Get free booklet about Zo-ak Tablets—the formula of well-known New York physician created especially for men. Zo-ak contains quick-acting vegetable stimulants plus essential vitamin concentrates in adequate amounts to build up health and strength. Ask for Zo-ak (blue box) at any good druggist, and write for free booklet by registered physician. Sent in sealed envelope by Zo-ak Company, 50 West 45 St., Dept. A, New York

BELIEVE IN LUCK?-$

Carry a pair of GENUINE BRAHMA RED LIVE HIGHLY MAGNETIC LODESTONES! Legend reputes, Occult Oriental ancients superstitiously carried two Live Lodestones as MOST POWERFUL MAGNETIC "LUCKY" CHARMS, one to "attract" Good Luck in Money, Games, Love, Business, Work, etc., the other to "prevent" Bad Luck, Losses, Evil, Trouble, Harm, etc. Believe in Luck? Carry a Pair of these curious Genuine Brahma Red Live Lodestones! We make no supernatural claims. $1.97 Postpaid for the two, with all information. $1.97 and 15c extra if C.O.D. Satisfaction GUARANTEED or Money Returned. Order yours NOW!

ASTROL CO., Dept. 1857, Main P. O.
Box 72, BROOKLYN, N. Y.

NOTICE! Beware of imitations! We absolutely GUARANTEE these Genuine Brahma Lodestones are ALIVE! We believe they are just what you want, the REAL THING—POWERFUL DRAWING, EXTRA HIGHLY MAGNETIC! Fully Guaranteed—Order TODAY! Copyright 1937—A. Co.

NEW

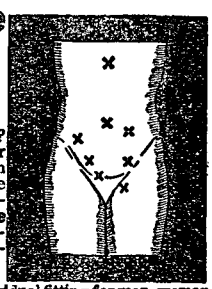
BENJAMIN AIR PISTOLS

$7.50

Powerful—Accurate—Economical—Practical—Adjustable Shooting Force—Amazing Maximum Velocity—cal. 177 or 22 and BB—For Target and Small Game—the only Genuine Compressed Air Pistol for shooting BB on the market—Single Shot with Bolt Action—Hammer Fire—Hair Trigger—Safety. Price $7.50. Holster $2.00. Also 177 and 22 Single Shot Air Rifles $7.50—Single Shot BB Air Rifle $6.00—25 Shot BB Repeater Air Rifle $7.50—at Dealer or Direct—No license required—Safe for indoor use.

FULL DETAILS—TARGETS—FREE—WRITE TODAY.
BENJAMIN AIR RIFLE CO., 883 MARION ST., ST. LOUIS, MO.

Is Your Rupture HERE?



Why continue to suffer with rupture? Stop your worries and fears. Send for the facts about my perfected invention—the Brooks Appliance for reducible rupture—with the automatic AIR-CUSHION support that gives Nature a chance to close the opening. Thousands bought by doctors for themselves and patients.

Sent on Trial—Made-to-measure, individual fitting for man, woman or child. Low-priced, sanitary, durable. No obnoxious springs or hard pads; no metal girdle to rust. Safe and comfortable. Helps Nature get results. Not sold through stores—beware of imitations. Write today for full information sent free in plain sealed envelope.

BROOKS APPLIANCE CO. 188-T State St. Marshall, Mich.

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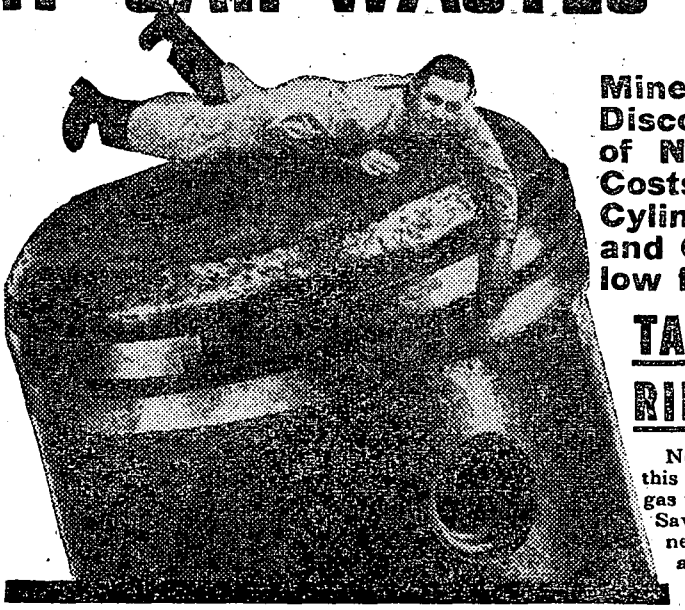
DON'T BUY RINGS or REBORE IF CAR WASTES OIL and GAS



Miner's Amazing Mineral Discovery Saves Up to 95% of New Ring and Rebore Costs—If Worn Rings and Cylinders are Wasting Oil and Gas Send Coupon Below for FREE SAMPLE

TAKES PLACE OF NEW RINGS AND REBORE!

Nearly a half-million motorists have used this revolutionary method of cutting oil and gas waste caused by worn rings and cylinders. Savings up to 50% reported. Give your car new power, pep, speed and quiet with this amazing mineral discovered in the Rocky Mountains. Awarded A. T. L. Seal of Approval.

Quickly placed through spark plug openings and at a fraction of the cost of new rings and rebore, this amazing mineral fills in and plates worn rings and cylinder walls. Ovrhaul gives your motor increased compression. Cuts oil consumption, increases gas mileage, adds new power and speed, with other substantial benefits of new rings and rebore. Ovrhaul has been thoroughly tested and proved by impartial laboratories and great Universities in the United States and abroad. Proved harmless to finest motors.

WHY PAY UP TO $151.37 For New Rings and Reboring?

If worn rings and cylinders cause your car to be an oil and gas eater—before you spend a lot of money, try Ovrhaul. Give it an opportunity to do for you what it has done for thousands of others. Here are costs of new rings and rebore on a few 1935 models:

Make	Cost of New Rings and Rebore	Time of Car Tie-up
Chevrolet	$50.00	2 days
De Soto	62.50	2 days
Dodge	59.20	2 days
Ford $50 to	55.00	2 days
Buick	80.00	2½ days
Cadillac	161.37	2 days

ENDORSED

By Member of

Society Automotive Engineers
National Aeronautical Assn.
Detroit Soc. of Engineering
Pontiac Engineers Club

Let us send you L. H. Smith's complete report which shows that the compression of a badly worn 6-cylinder motor was increased 32.4% and brought back to within .09 points of its original new car efficiency. Such tests conclusively prove the sensational merits of Ovrhaul.

INSTALLED IN 30 MINUTES!

Ovrhaul works on the mineral plating principle—No special tools needed. No car tie-up. No danger of ruining motor by grinding cylinder walls—works in while you drive—saves you time and money. Gives you months of extra car use. A single application lasts up to 10,000 miles.

MONEY-MAKING TERRITORIES OPEN

For Salesmen and Distributors Who Act Quick!

Sales of Ovrhaul have been phenomenal. Hundreds of Salesmen and Distributors in the United States and abroad. The biggest money-maker in years. National magazine, newspaper and radio advertising carry the message of Ovrhaul to 18,000,000 car owners. The market has barely been scratched. To wide-awake men we offer opportunity—an opportunity which may never come your way again. A fast selling, repeating article, fully protected by U. S. and foreign patents. Saves motorists millions of dollars, ***Ovrhaul Sells for Less Than Spark Plugs.*** Exclusive territories still open—but you must act quick if you want in on this.

Phone, Write or Wire TODAY!

Let us send you free sample which every salesman is furnished for demonstration. Let us show you, with their permission, ACTUAL earnings of our distributors. Let us show you how you can start in this business NOW—before all territories are assigned. The market is there—we have the product—are you the man? Let's find out. Write, phone or wire today.

B. L. Mellinger, Pres., OVRHAUL CO., H-918 Los Angeles Calif.

MAIL THIS COUPON TODAY!

SAMPLE FREE!

If your car is wasting oil and gas, before you spend up to $151.37 for new rings and rebore—send your name and address on the coupon below for a free sample of this amazing mineral which expands up to 30 times when heated and full details of a real money-making opportunity. ***Air mail reaches us overnight.***

Free SAMPLE COUPON

B. L. Mellinger, Pres., (*Paste on Postcard and mail*)
Ovrhaul Co., H-918 Los Angeles, Calif.
Without cost or obligation, rush me FREE SAMPLE. Also show me your big money-making plan.

Name.....

Address.....

City..... State.....

Name and Make of Car.....

Please mention this magazine when answering advertisements

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MAN AND WIFE WANTED!

To run local COFFEE AGENCY

NEW FORDS GIVEN AS A BONUS

Splendid Chance To Make Up To $60.00 in a Week

If you are married and willing to cooperate with your life partner in operating a Coffee Agency right in your own locality, send your name at once for full details about my plan—FREE.

It is now possible for married couples to make up to $60 in a single week if you can work harmoniously together. Wife handles the orders, keeps records, etc., while the husband delivers and collects. Steady, permanent business of one to two hundred customers can quickly be established if you follow the simple, proven plans that I send.

START EARNING AT ONCE

I'll send you everything you need—your complete outfit containing full-size packages of products, also printed forms, blanks, advertising literature, samples, etc., together with simple instructions for both the husband and wife, so you can start your earnings right away. Make as high as $45.00 your very first week.

Everybody uses Coffee, Tea, Spices, Flavoring Extracts, Baking Powder, Flour, Cocoa, Canned Goods, and other foods every day. They MUST BUY these things to live. You simply take care of your regular customers right in your locality—just keep them supplied with the things they need. You handle all the money and pocket a big share of it for yourself. You keep all the profits—you don't divide up with anyone. Hundreds of housewives in many localities are waiting, right now, to be served with these nationally famous products.

I SEND EVERYTHING

Just as soon as I hear from you I will send you complete details—tell you all the inside workings of this nation-wide Coffee Agency Plan. I will explain just how to establish your customers; how to give them service and make good cash earnings. You can plan it so you give only 5 days a week to your business, collect your profits on Friday, and have all day Saturday and Sunday for vacation or rest. The plans I send you took years to perfect. You know they must be good because they have brought quick help to hundreds of other men and women, both married and single, who needed money.

FORD CARS GIVEN

Over and above the cash earnings you make I will give you a brand-new Ford Sedan as a bonus for producing. This is not a contest or a raffle. I offer a Ford Car—as an extra reward—to everyone who starts in this business.

YOU DON'T RISK A PENNY

You can start a Coffee Agency and make money the first week. You don't have to risk a cent of your own money. I absolutely guarantee this. No experience is needed. You use your home as headquarters. You can build your business on our capital. Full details of money making plans are free. Send your name today for the free book giving all inside facts, then you can decide. Don't waste a minute as you might lose this opportunity through unnecessary delay. ACT AT ONCE.

ALBERT MILLS

6412 Monmouth Ave., CINCINNATI, OHIO

WONDERFUL SUCCESS

Reported by Others

Clare C. Wellman, N. J., tried my plan and cleared $96.00 in a week. Hans Coordes, Nebr., made $27.95 in a day; $96.40 in a week. Norman Geisler, Mich., reported $33.00 profit for one day and as high as $129.00 in a single week. Ruby Hannen, a woman in West Virginia, stated that she made $17.00 in one day and $73.00 in a week. Wilbur Whitcomb, Ohio, reported $30.00 profit in a day and $146.00 in one week. I have scores of reports of exceptional earnings like these as evidence of the amazing possibilities of this money-making offer.

Free Offer COUPON

ALBERT MILLS, President
6412 Monmouth Ave., Cincinnati, Ohio

Send your free book telling how to start a local Coffee Agency in which a married couple (or single persons) can make up to $60.00 in a week. We will read it and then let you know if we want to accept this opportunity.

Name.....

Address.....

.....

(Please Print or Write Plainly)

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STOP THAT ITCHING AND SCRATCHING

According to the Government Health Bulletin No. E-28 at least 50% of the adult population of the United States are being attacked by the disease known as Athlete's Foot.

There are many other names given to this disease, but you can easily tell if you have it.

Usually the disease starts between the toes. Little watery blisters form and the skin cracks and peels. After a while the itching becomes intense and you feel as though you would like to scratch off all the skin.

FOOT-ITCH
(ATHLETE'S FOOT)

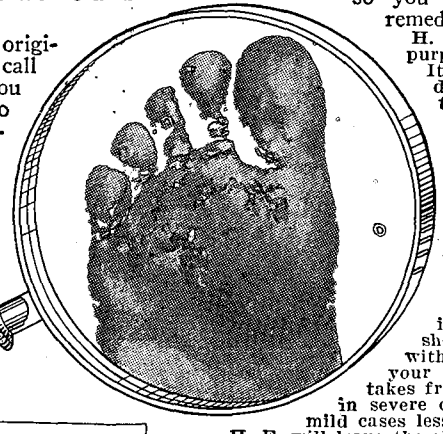
Send Coupon-Don't Pay till Relieved

Beware of It Spreading

Often the disease travels all over the bottom of the feet. The soles of your feet become red and swollen. The skin also cracks and peels, and the itching becomes worse and worse.

It has been said that this disease originated in the trenches, so some people call it Trench Foot. Whatever name you give it, however, the thing to do is to get rid of it as quickly as possible, because it is very contagious and it may go to your hands or even to the under arm or crotch of the legs.

Most people who have Athlete's Foot have tried all kinds of remedies to cure it without success. Ordinary germicides, antiseptics, salve or ointments seldom do any good.



Here's How to Treat It

The germ that causes the disease is known as Tinea Trichophyton. It buries itself deep in the tissues of the skin and is very hard to kill. A test made shows that it takes 20 minutes of boiling to kill the germ, so you can see why the ordinary remedies are unsuccessful.

H. F. was developed solely for the purpose of treating Athlete's Foot. It is a liquid that penetrates and dries quickly. You just paint the affected parts. It peels off the infected skin and works its way deep into the tissue of the skin where the germ breeds.

Itching Stops Immediately

As soon as you apply H. F. you will find that the itching is immediately relieved. You should paint the infected parts with H. F. night and morning until your feet are well. Usually this takes from three to ten days, although in severe cases it may take longer or in mild cases less time.

H. F. will leave the skin soft and smooth. You will marvel at the quick way it brings you relief; especially if you are one of those who have tried for years to get rid of Athlete's Foot without success.

H. F. Sent on FREE TRIAL

Sign and mail the coupon and a bottle of H. F. will be mailed you immediately. Don't send any money and don't pay the postman any money, don't pay anything any time unless H. F. is helping you. If it does help you we know that you will be glad to send us $1.00 for the treatment at the end of ten days. That's how much faith we have in H. F. Read, sign and mail the coupon today.

Mail this Coupon

GORE PRODUCTS, INC., S.S.
814 Perdido St., New Orleans, La.

Please send me immediately a complete treatment for foot trouble as described above. I agree to use it according to directions. If at the end of 10 days my feet are getting better I will send you $1.00. If I am not entirely satisfied I will return the unused portion of the bottle to you within 15 days from the time I receive it.

NAME .....

ADDRESS.....

CITY..... STATE.....

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